

Christmas Sermon, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's so familiar to us, isn't it,
the wonderful Christmas story
as it's told in the gospel according to St Luke?
A baby in a manger,
shepherds watching,
angels singing,
and everyone
praising
God.
Our eyes shine
with the magic of it all,
and all seems right with the world.

Christmas
is a magical time, not only for children.
Last week,
I was in England for the baptism of my new baby niece.
There might not have been snow,
but pretty much everything else
was as you might imagine.
Wandering in and out of churches
I caught the pure clear voices of a girl's school rehearsing for their carol service,
the glory of the final amens
of Handel's Messiah,
the wriggling and giggling of five year old shepherds
waiting their turn in the nativity.

But at the same time I was aware
of the news headlines.
The searing images coming from Syria,
streets bombed to rubble;
children playing in the dust;
families with their life's belongings
in plastic bags
waiting for the buses that would take them to safety.

The Christmas markets in Germany,
candlelight and joy and music
scarred by a radical, armed with a truck.
Rumblings on the international stage,
echoes of the Cold War.

If only we could just magic all that away,
leaving us with a world
where peace and joy and love
rule the day.
If only....

But that isn't
the world we live in
and nor was it
the world that the Christ child
was born into.
And the gospel of Luke
reminds us of that
at the very start.

“In those days,”
he begins,
“a decree went out from Emperor Augustus
that all the world should be registered.
This was the first registration
and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.”

The story of the baby Jesus
doesn't begin
with a manger,
nor even
with a birth.
It begins
by reminding us
that the world as Jesus' family knew it
was the world of the Roman empire,
their homeland under occupation,
and their lives shaped
by the whims of their overlords.

And they had decreed
that everyone
should be counted,
accounted,
named and numbered,
identified
and IDed.
Making sure
that everyone knew
exactly who was in charge.
And to add to the intrusion
into their lives
this accounting,
this numbering,
this IDing
was to happen
in the places where
their ancestors came from.
“Go home” they said,
even if home
was somewhere
the people had never themselves lived,
even if
going home
meant shutting up shop
and closing their businesses
and dragging their families,
elderly
and newborn alike
across the desert pathways and stony roads
that led to the place
required,
soldiers along the road
witnesses to their dislocation.
Until finally they arrived,
stumbling with relief
into the villages
where once
their people
had lived.

No extra provisions made
for the visitors;
half the village gone
on their own mandated journey,
doors barred
and market stalls empty.

And there they were registered,
the authorities
satisfied
for the time being,
and they were free to go home.
Except that for Mary and Joseph,
their child was coming
and this was no time to risk
another long
uncertain
journey.

And so they found shelter wherever
they could,
and cobbled together
a few comforts.
A warm fire for the cold night;
a straw bed with a blanket,
and a wooden trough
a cradle.
It was enough.
And there they placed their child.
Their child, their firstborn
insisting his way into life,
in spite of the empire's commands
and the governor's counting.

They thought to control the people,
the Emperor and the governor did,
thought to instill an order
that made clear
who was in charge
and who ruled the world,

the child to be
just another figure
on the census
page.

Except
that over their decrees and orders,
over the tramp of the soldiers boots,
over the shuffling of people sent to their hometowns,
rang the voice of the angel:
"Do not be afraid;
for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy
for all the people:
to you is born this day
in the city of David a Savior,
who is the Messiah,
the Lord.
This will be a sign for you:
you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth
and lying in a manger."
And exploding into sound
came the voices
of the heavenly host.
"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Augustus
has passed into history;
Quirinius' census
a mere footnote.
But the child, the child
supposed to be
just another number, unimportant
in the scheme of things, the child,
the child
is the Savior.

Born,
not just for his parents, Mary and Joseph,
not just for his family,

happy as they were to welcome him

Born

for shepherds in their fields.

Born

for wise men from afar.

Born

for angels singing Gloria.

Born

the Messiah,

the hope

of the world,

the peace

of God, then,

and now.

Half a world away

and half of history ago,

this child was born

to bring peace

and hope

to the world.

This child was born

for Syrian families

waiting for buses to safety,

this child was born

for Christmas shoppers

caught up in market terrorism,

this child was born

for those who are weary

with Cold War memories awakened.

This child was born

for the whole world.

This child

was born for us.

But not to remain

a child for ever.

This child grew in strength

and in wisdom,

and grown up
travelled among his people
teaching, and healing
and bringing to them
the presence and promise
of God.

And died,
and was raised
and continues to come among us by his Spirit.
So that all of us
may know his peace,
all of us
may know his life,
all of us
may know his love.

And just as
the powers of the Roman empire
could not overshadow him
nor can the fears
and evils of our day
overshadow this child, this baby,
born in Bethlehem
this night,
Immanuel,
God
with us.