

Christmas Day, Year A, 2013
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Finally it's here! Christmas Day,
that wonderful day when we celebrate
the birth of our Savior.

We've delved into the stockings hung on our mantelpieces, hoping for something more
than a lump of coal;
unwrapped some - if not all - of those presents
that we spent so many hours carefully wrapping,
and then dragged ourselves out
against the tide of people still sleeping in
or doing some final gift wrapping
or enjoying a leisurely brunch
to worship the Christ child.

The story of the birth of Jesus
is one of those stories
that most of us know by heart,
at least in some form.
The baby, the parents, the manger,
the angel, the shepherds, the sheep,
the star, the wise men, the gifts.
All of them muddled together
in one
glorious
panorama.

But that's not
how the bible tells it.
You might have noticed
that our gospel reading today
from the first chapter of the gospel according to St John
said nothing about angels
or shepherds
or even the birth of a child.

Last Spring,
our family bible study group
studied what are technically known

as the infancy narratives,
the stories in the gospels
about Christ's birth.
We read the beginnings of each of the four gospels
and talked about them,
looking at what was the same
and what was different.

Matthew begins
with a genealogy,
or as we thought of it,
Jesus's family tree,
going back through David
to Abraham.
Then we heard
the story of the angel
appearing to Joseph,
who isn't sure he wants anything to do with it all,
and the promise that this child would be called Emmanuel,
God with us.

And then
it was the story of the wise men,
traditionally three in number like their gifts,
but the bible doesn't actually tell us how many there were, two or three or ten,
the wise men
following a star
to find
where a king would be born,
and King Herod afraid, and demanding they come back and tell him
what they found,
but when they found the child
in the place where the star stopped,
they offered him gifts
of gold
and frankincense
and myrrh,
and went home another route,
without reporting back
to Herod.
No inn, no manger, no shepherds, no angels,
not even a birth.
That's the way Matthew tells it.

And then we came to Mark,
and he doesn't tell us anything.
Jesus appears
as a full grown man,
no history
or childhood stories.

Luke
sets the scene
with the birth of John the Baptist,
and then we move
into the well known story
of Gabriel
appearing to Mary,
the journey
to Bethlehem,
the inn with no vacancy,
and the simple manger crib.
And angels
and shepherds
and glory to God.
And finally
another genealogy, another family tree,
this time
all the way back
to Adam.

But no star, no kings, no gifts.

And finally
there was John,
the words that we heard
this morning.
Not so much
a story,
as a reflection on the gracious gift of God
that we experience in the incarnation,
the word and light and life
the embodiment of God
who is beyond all
our imaginings.

But who comes to us,
God in flesh,
Jesus Christ,
full of grace and truth.

No shepherds, angels, kings or stars,
no Mary or Joseph or stable or manger,
just God
with us.

At the end of our reading of the infancy narratives
I asked the kids
which one was true.
Which gospel
got it right.

“All of them,” they said.
“They just think
that different things
are more important
to tell us.”

And of course, they are right.

Each of us
comes to the story of Jesus
with a different history,
different expectations,
different longings.

And God knows that,
God knows that.

And I suspect that
that’s why
there are four gospels.
Because
we need to hear
how different people
encountered Jesus.
We need to hear
what they found important
what they found

life-giving.

Just like the gospel writers,
each of us connects
with different parts
of the story,
and at different times
in our lives.

And what matters
is not so much
which part we connect with,
whether it's the baby in the manger
or the uncertainty of Mary,
the doubt of Joseph
or the long family tree,
the shepherds in the fields
or the glory of the angels,
or the seeking of the wise men,
or a word made flesh,
what matters
is what we do
with that connection,
what matters
is how we respond.

There's one character
that we often assume is in
one of the stories that the gospels tell us about Jesus' birth.
And that's the innkeeper.

He doesn't actually appear in person;
just the brief note in Luke
that the baby was placed in a manger
because there was no room at the inn.
and from that
we have extrapolated a character
who stands at the door
when Joseph knocks.
"Sorry. No room."
And when, in desperation, Joseph begs,
says grudgingly
"I guess you could use the stable."

But what if, what if
the reason we keep adding in that character
in our pageants and stories and memories
is because he stands in
for all the people who met the baby Jesus.
he stands in for the seeking wise men
and the glorious angels,
the shepherds in their fields
and the uncertain parents.
He stands in for them
daring to name
the question that all of them
probably asked,
Do I have room in my life
for this baby?

Do I have room
to trust God
that this child is a gift
and not a burden?

Do I have room
to trust the promise of God
as much as the security of my stuff?

Do I have room
to risk everything
on the sign of a star?

Do I have room?

Because that's all Christ asks.
A little room
for the miracle of God
made flesh
to come
and dwell with us.

As Christina Rossetti so beautifully put it,

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give Him?
Give my heart.

Whatever part of the story
you connect with,
Matthew or Mark or Luke or John,
Mary or Joseph, angels, shepherds or wise men,
word or light or life,
the question is the same.

Christ has come, born among us.
Do we have room
for him?