

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

It's Christmas Eve,
and everything is ready
for the birth of the Christ Child,
and we all know
how it's supposed to be.

Last week
I noticed that a creche
was set out on a table
at my goddaughter's house.
Jesus was in the manger,
surrounded by shepherds and kings.
Being a bit of a Christmas literalist,
I took the baby Jesus out of his crib,
and hid him under some pine branches.
Then I moved the shepherds off to the side,
and put the kings
up on the window ledge.
And for good effect, put a couple of jelly beans
in the manger.

When I came back a couple of days later,
the jelly beans
were gone.
The baby was back in his crib,
and the shepherds and kings
clustered round once more.

The careful handiwork
of my goddaughter.
When I asked her
why she had put them back,
she said,
"Because that's how they're supposed to be."

"But when was baby Jesus born?" I asked.

"On Christmas!"

“But Christmas isn’t for a few days, so he shouldn’t be there yet.”

“But he needs a crib!”

The baby in his crib,
proud parents looking on,
shepherds and kings
worshipping
and offering gifts,
all gently lit
by a golden star;
my goddaughter
knows
how it’s supposed to be.

As do we all.
The Christmas story is so familiar,
imprinted on our minds and hearts
from pageants and hymns
and constant retelling.
We know
how it’s supposed to be.

Just as we know how our own celebrations are supposed to be.
A thick green tree,
precious decorations, handed down for generations
or carefully preserved from our children’s preschool days,
all reflecting the hundreds of tiny lights.
The presents have been opened,
and everyone received
just what they wanted;
the meal is cooked to perfection
and the table conversation
delightful.
And huge fluffy snowflakes drift down gently outside.

It’s how it’s supposed to be,
at least in our imaginations.

But is it?

A couple of days ago

I saw a link on Facebook
to a video made in Hungary.

A young couple
waits by the side of the road.
The woman looks unwell;
the man is shouldering her weight
as she clenches his hand.
They need a ride,
somewhere,
anywhere.

Car after car
passes them by,
until finally
a truck stops.
The driver is unshaven,
tattooed,
morose,
but he lets them climb up into the cab.

Darkness falls;
it starts to rain;
the woman begins to groan.

They pull over at a rest stop,
and as the couple head towards the restroom,
the door opens
and out comes a woman,
walk unsteady, short skirt,
accepting a crumpled note from a man.

The light on the restroom
sparks
and dies.

And then there is a cry.
A baby's cry.

And there in the restroom,
a tiny hand,
and exhausted parents
smiling.

The truck driver
opens the restroom door.
Sees the baby,
and his face splits
in a grin.
He pulls out his phone
to take a picture.

The door opens again, this time
the woman in the short red skirt.
She crouches, smiles,
and wraps her red jacket with fake fur edging
around the newborn infant.
The other man joins them.

Outside now,
they share a drink.

And then a police car pulls up, lights flashing.
The young couple look afraid.

The truck driver
walks over to the police car, pulling out his phone,
with the picture on it.
“It’s a boy!”

A stable lit with golden light
or a young woman giving birth in a rest room.
How is it supposed to be?
My suspicion is
that the reality that first Christmas Eve
was probably closer to the video
than the picture
lodged
in our imaginations.

Just as our own Christmas celebrations
are never quite like
that mythical one.
The cats knock over the Christmas tree and smash our precious ornaments.
You receive
yet another pair of socks

instead of the book you had been hoping for.
Some part of dinner
is overdone or underdone
or simply doesn't make it to the table.

There is always a gap
between our imagination
and reality.

And sometimes
that gap
looms large.

This year, in our own community here at St James,
we have people
who are failing,
and who almost certainly
won't make another year.
We have people who have lost their jobs.
Many tables
will have an empty place.

It's not how
it's supposed to be.

But it's reality.
Just as it was reality
when the angel appeared to Joseph
to tell him
that he was to become a father,
kind of,
that his fiancé
was to bear a son
who was the child of God.
And young Mary
suddenly expecting
and confused
and wondering
what was to happen.
And the two of them, on the whim of a ruler,
making the long journey south to their ancestral home,
only to find
no place to stay,

and Mary giving birth in a stable.

It wasn't how it was supposed to be, not for any baby,
let alone
the King of kings.

But Christ came anyway,
Emmanuel,
God with us.

Many of you know
that my seven year old nephew
will spend Christmas in hospital,
being treated for leukemia.

A couple of days ago, my brother wrote this,
in anticipation of Christmas.

"...Christmas looms, with the sentimental question of Home for Christmas? Perhaps, but just as it was 2000 years ago, sometimes the powers that be force you to be elsewhere, to be thankful for what you have and where you are, just of somewhere to lay your head while nature takes its course. And Christmas comes to you, wherever it is."

Christmas comes to us, wherever we are.

Christ comes to us, wherever we are.

That is the blessing
of Christmas, that is how
it's supposed to be.
Not the picture perfect scenes of our imaginations,
but the reality
that each of us lives - whether that reality
is full of love and laughter,
or tinged with sadness and struggle,
or, more likely,
a mixture of both.

Whatever the reality
Christ comes to us.
A visible sign
of the love of God,
and more than a sign,
the actual presence of God.

God
with a newborn's cry.
God
with a child's curiosity.
God
with a teacher's wisdom.
God
with a healer's touch.
God
with a broken body.
God
with resurrected life.
God
with the breath of the Spirit.

God
with us.

This Christmas, know
that's how it's supposed to be.
Emmanuel,
God with us.