

Christmas Eve 2009

St. Peter's Episcopal Church

The Rev. Emily B. Richards

*Sitting on a Hillside in Palestine*

This is the first year that my three year old daughter, Maggie, has shown any interest in Christmas. When my husband, Daniel, and I put out our crèche earlier in the month Maggie asked lots of questions, like all children her age do. Why was the baby Jesus born in a barn? Were there others animal in the barn besides cows and sheep? Why did the angels come to shepherds? Why were they up so late at night? Didn't anyone else hear the angels singing? And of course the question that many children stump their parents with, If God is Jesus' Daddy then who is Joseph?

Daniel and I quickly realized that this story which was so familiar to us was actually hard to explain to a little one who was hearing it with fresh ears. Maggie's natural inquisitiveness reminded me once again of the strangeness of this story. It is such a beloved story, so utterly familiar, that its mystery can become lost on us. To say that God, the Creator of the Universe, became one of us in a child is in fact utterly shocking. There is much in this seemingly sweet, unsophisticated tale to keep us mystified. Our Messiah, the Saviour of all humanity, was born not in a palace, but in a barn among farm animals. His parents were not counted among the wealthy or powerful, but peasants who had such little clout that they couldn't even find a hotel room to stay in. And the first to receive news of Jesus' birth were not some dignitaries or the religious elite, but a motley crew of shepherds, the migrant workers of their day who were terrified by the celestial beings and their heavenly message. The mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, is often hard for us to articulate in rational, reasonable ways.

I imagine that dressing up as an angel and twirling down the aisle of the church to stand before the baby Jesus and his preteen parents in our Christmas pageant made a greater impression on my three year old daughter than any of the answers her father and I gave her about the nativity story. Our children remind us that mystery is something that must be experienced and not simply explained. The Rev. King Oehmig writes, "Christmas derives its power less from being a concept or theological proposition than from its meaning as a personal or communal experience." Just like all mysteries we encounter: the mysteries of birth and death, the mysteries of love and suffering and joy, the story of the Incarnation must be lived in order to be understood.

In his book, *In the Eye of the Storm*, The Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, Bishop of New Hampshire, recounts his Christmas Eve tradition of celebrating the Eucharist at the New Hampshire State Prison for Women. Part of why his relationship with these women means so much to him is that when he's with them, he feels closer to Jesus. Robinson writes, "It's not easy to feel close to Christ when you're sitting in a committee meeting or signing papers at a desk. But when you're doing the things that Jesus did with the people he did them with, it's a whole different story. As I write this," he continues, "it will soon be Christmas Eve again. The women and I will sing everything from 'O Holy Night' to 'Here Comes Santa Claus' during the hour before the service. And then the Eucharist will begin. And I will begin, once again, to wonder if this isn't the very kind of place God chose to be born as one of us.

There are always tears at this service. Most of these women will not know which of their relatives or friends are caring for their children that night. They will not be putting toys under the tree, or tucking their kids into bed in eager anticipation of Santa's visit. So when the tender story of a Mother and Child is read, they begin to weep. The prayers are heartbreakingly real and personal. They are human pleas for redemption to the God of all that is.

It is my honor – and my Christmas gift to myself – to be among these, my sisters, on Christmas Eve. It is not only where the bishop ought to be on Christmas Eve; it's where he wants to be. Because sitting among these women, on Christmas Eve, is a little bit like sitting on a hillside in Palestine, alongside the sheep and shepherds, and hearing the most amazing good news of all time."

Christmas is an experience to be lived, an encounter with the Word made flesh to be embraced. Christmas happens in a prison between a bishop and a group of women inmates. It happens when we sing Christmas carols with residents of the local homeless shelter or when we make new friends with fellow Episcopalians in Guatemala. It happens when we share the Eucharist with one of our homebound parishioners or marvel at our children as they live out this story in their own way, among tinsel and straw and cardboard. It happens when we break bread together with our families and friends around our tables or when we stop to greet a stranger on the street. The true mystery of Christmas, of God with us, is that we can find ourselves sitting on a hillside in Palestine all year round. For the message the angels proclaimed long ago is a message we hear echoed throughout the ordinary and extraordinary moments our lives.

We gather here on this holy night as family, friends and strangers, whether or not we fully believe in this unbelievable tale. We recall this unsophisticated, strange and yet compelling story which continues to touch our hearts and change our lives. Together we celebrate the events that took place in Bethlehem some 2000 years ago even as await for God to come us yet again in the unexpected moments of our lives, experiencing afresh the mysterious gift of God's incarnate love.