

It's Christmas Eve, it's time to look past the secular images of sparkling lights, past the presents piled under the Christmas tree, past Santa and visions of sugar plums, and think back to what it was like almost 2,000 years ago when Mary and Joseph were on their way to Bethlehem. We enjoyed a simple retelling of Luke's gospel at the 5:30 service when the children set up the crèche piece-by-piece, accompanied by the hymns that reflect different perspectives on the journey to Bethlehem.

Now all the pieces are in place: Mary and Joseph, the baby, the shepherds, their sheep, the ox and the cow in the stable, and even the three wise men. The stars scattered about the cloth represent the offerings of hearts of those who come to the Christ Child. Although you won't have the opportunity to place stars as your symbols of self-offering the fact that you are here, late in the evening on Christmas Eve will be enough. It's enough to say that you are willing to enter once again into the mystery of the Word-Made-Flesh, the coming of the Christ Child. Like a pebble dropped into a pool creating ever-enlarging ripples as it falls, that pebble forever changes things, just as the coming of the Christ Child changes things for you and for me and for all who have come to believe.

Luke's story depicts people who have been drawn away from their usual context although the more accurate word might be propelled, propelled from their usual context into a whole new reality.

In our opening scene Joseph and Mary are making the trip to Bethlehem, leaving their comfortable village of Nazareth some 85 miles away in order to be registered as subjects of the Emperor Augustus.

This would be inconvenient under the best of circumstances but these are not the best of circumstances. Mary is about to give birth and walking 85 miles to Nazareth. Mary is walking 85 miles when she could have been at home surrounded by her mother and attended to by a midwife but this is just one more thing in a life that was upended when the Angel Gabriel dropped in nine months ago.

Moreover this couple, this engaged but not yet married couple, has already been uprooted. Joseph has apparently agreed to acknowledge a child that is not his own. How extraordinary is that? You can imagine the soul-searching that went on there but here he is on the way to Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph are human and we know that as human beings ourselves weird stuff happens when God is involved because God has us doing things that we would have thought beyond our capacity. Think about Moses, David, Isaiah, Rahab, Ruth, and Ester, for example. But now there's Jesus. The Word has been made flesh—cute, cuddly, flesh but flesh nonetheless. The wall between heaven and the earth has been breached and in a few short years Jesus will begin to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Jesus is leaving behind his position as the exalted Godhead to take up his life as a mortal. Boy is he in for a surprise! Well probably not a surprise but as we all know there is a heck of a difference between understanding the concept and experiencing the reality. As God's Word Jesus had played an active role in creation and in advancing God's plan of salvation but now Jesus is about to experience it all first-hand. Even for a god the shift into vulnerable, mortal flesh must have taken some doing.

The shepherds also experienced a shift in their context. The lowliest of the low they are tending their flocks on a cold winter's night. Suddenly the sky is ablaze with the Glory of the Lord and an angel speaks to them. I don't imagine that they had any expectation of ever encountering the Godhead, a privilege usually reserved for prophets, priests, and kings. The appearance of the Angel was terrifying but they left their bedrolls and campfires to visit the childbed of a woman they didn't know and to worship a child born in a stable. Once in Bethlehem they would share with Mary what they had heard from the angel and then spread the word among all whom they met. Unlikely heralds but heralds nonetheless.

Although the wise men don't appear in our gospel for Christmas Eve or in Luke's gospel at all, they are here in front of us in the crèche so they need to be counted as well. These guys were drawn from their countries far away to follow a star. They left behind their lives, their careers, their reputations - to follow a star. Not sure that would be covered under Family Leave or even a basis for a sabbatical but they are the forerunners of the gentiles who will spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Unfortunately the arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem will terrify Herod and precipitate the slaughter of the innocents. And it goes on from there. Ripple after ripple down through the ages right up until today.

When God chooses to intervene in the world all kinds of things can happen but in this case God's intervention was permanent and very, very personal. Mary gave birth to the Christ child. The cosmic mystery of God's love, God's tenderness, God's desire for intimacy with us is distilled into the image of mother and child. What flows forth from that image is light, God's grace shattering the darkness, expanding ever outward to beat back sin and death, to reveal to us our true humanity and to give us hope even in the face of suffering and loss.

In the birth of Christ we have been given a gift, the gift that offers us the chance to become children of the light to help to reflect the light of Christ to the rest of the world and in so doing find ourselves transformed. We can refuse to accept what has been offered to us in Christ Jesus. We can ignore the needs of others and the pain suffering around us but it is that pain and suffering that Jesus chose to embrace, chose to endure for our sake by coming into the world as a newborn child. Everybody has a chance to say yes to the Christ Child and on Christmas we can remind ourselves of that opportunity which is never too late.

Mary said yes, Joseph said yes, Jesus said yes, the shepherds and the wise men said yes, but Herod said no. There will always be those who say no. Herod will deny the in-breaking of God into the world and try to eradicate traces of what God has done. But he will not succeed. Love's pure light has come into the world to redeem the world. Although the darkness is always present, a bubble of light is formed whenever 2 or 3 are gathered, especially on this night when we remember and rejoice in our dear Savior's birth.

Amen