

## The Inn of Our Hearts

Well, it's still okay to say "Merry Christmas" even though your neighbors may have already turned off the Christmas lights. Yes, it's true that our Church calendar has marked off twelve full days to celebrate the birth of Christ but many of us have already moved on to finalizing our New Year's party plans or, God forbid, writing down our New Year's resolutions.

We have already encountered heralding angels, an array of barn animals, shepherds in the fields, a star of Bethlehem, a host of angels, and the brand new parents Mary and Joseph, with their baby Jesus. But wait! Before we move on. Have you and I chiseled long enough and deep enough through the many layers of Christmas to discover the depth of the mystery.

Today's Gospel story from John is an alternative Christmas story that is too expansive to be captured by a traditional Christmas pageant. It is rolled out before us in poetic imagery that is eternal and beyond all human conception of time: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."**

This grand and cosmic story of how God came to be born into our world bears little resemblance to the secularized Santa who comes into our world this time of year bringing gifts from the North Pole. Nor does the Gospel of John tell the familiar Bethlehem Christmas story centered on Mary, Joseph, and the babe sleeping in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes.

"In the beginning..." is a phrase full of meaning! The Jews who first heard this opening act to the gospel of John read to them would have at once recognized it as part of the Creation story in the very first book of the bible, The Book of Genesis.

Both Genesis and the Prologue to the Gospel of John are accounts of how God created our world through the power of God's eternal and life giving Word, revealing a loving Creator whose plans included all of creation in a process of new birth.

Both speak of how glorious light comes into being to dispel the darkness of the world. Both speak of the power of life itself, the dynamic energy that animates all

of Creation, and connects all of God's creatures to each other with a shared destiny in Christ.

Darkness can take many forms as we all well know: from violence to corruption; from deceit, to forgery; from betrayal to coercion. Darkness is known by so many names. One of the forms darkness takes – especially this time of year – is loneliness, isolation, and alienation. Just to be clear, I am not talking about the beautiful moments of healthy contemplative solitude and silence when we are quiet inside but still feel connected to God all of creation.

No, I am talking about the heart-wrenching feeling of being completely alone in the world; in a state of alienation from others and God. I am talking about the horrible feeling that nobody seems to care about us. Even if you are invited to a lot of holiday parties, you can still feel lonely in a large, merry crowd; even standing near a Christmas tree surrounded by a lot of expensive presents, you can still feel very empty.

And then I think of those living on our cold, wet streets this time of year. A growing number of hungry and homeless people each year peer into display windows in department stores looking at worlds that will never be part of their own world. And so it is no wonder then that many, after the big holiday let down, are left with "Tis the season to be lonely."

And that is why I think today's Christmas Creation story from the Gospel of John has the potential of being such a powerfully healing Word from our loving Creator whose very nature is relational and has overcome many obstacles to find His way through the stars, and sometimes the muck in our lives, to touch us with a personal message of tender mercy and grace.

My Christmas was a little different this year. It began as a story of creation. A lifelong friend of mine, after losing his wife to brain cancer just a few short years ago, married again. The bride had her own story of longing for the intimacy that only lifelong companionship can bring and the many years it had taken her to find that special person.

The wedding was not the usual service from the Episcopal Prayer Book. The ceremony began in complete darkness as the story from Genesis was told and the families and guests listened intently. Eventually the entire room was filled with little ones with masks, posing as animals and birds. Gradually the entire sanctuary was filled with light and we were all filled with the kind of hope and promise that we long for, especially at Christmas. It revealed a God who is constantly leading us out of loneliness and leading us into relationship.

And God said, “It is not good for man or woman to be alone, I will bring you companionship and my love.” **For The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”**

There is a side of the Christmas story that often isn't captured by our music, art, or prayers. Often we forget how terribly lonely large portions of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus' journey was. We are tempted to forget that they were real people walking through real events in their lives in which they often felt inadequately prepared, financially challenged, under-resourced, and without enough family and friends to support them.

Joseph didn't have to take the pregnant Mary to Bethlehem. The Roman government only required the male head of the family to register for taxes. It is likely Mary, scandalously pregnant, had been rejected by her family, and his. They were alone with God.

But to Bethlehem Joseph and Mary traveled onward in faith. Unfortunately many closed doors awaited them in Bethlehem. Think of all those closed doors. There was no room in the Inn. If they had close relatives and friends who cared about them don't you think they would have invited the laboring Mary and the worried Joseph inside their homes? The story mentions no nurse, no childbirth coach, or family members attending to their needs while they huddled in a cold, dark cave fit only for animals.

And yet the dark shroud of darkness that had descended on the Holy Family was not dark enough to suppress the true light from entering and transforming their world and ours. A profound act of creation has begun. **For the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”**

Like a distress beacon which calls for help and simultaneously is a source for hope, the crowning work of God's creation, Jesus Christ our Savior, is born into our hearts anew so that we might never be lonely. Keep this Christmas spirit alive! Visit someone who is feeling sad and alone. It could be someone you know or it could be a neighbor who never has any visitors.

Keep the faith and be ever watchful for the Light. Make room in the Inn of your hearts. There are a host of angelic messengers and wise men on their way to assist you! Amen.