

Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2013

Welcome, one and all, to All Saints by the Sea, on this magical and most holy Christmas Eve. First of all, a word of welcome to all of you who are local to the Santa Barbara area – whether you are a regular part of the All Saints community, or whether you are a first-time or occasional guest joining us within these lovely confines tonight. And welcome, especially to those of you who live away from this beautiful slice of God’s creation, and have traveled some distance to bless us with your presence here this evening.

I need a quick show of hands here for just a moment – how many of you live at least 75 miles away from where we are right now? I ask that distance specifically, because that is about the same distance as Mary and Joseph had to travel from their home in Nazareth to the town of Bethlehem in that wonderful Christmas story we heard just a few minutes ago, so that they might be counted in the national census which the Emperor Augustus had ordered. 75 miles – that’s further than it is from here to Santa Maria to our north, about the same as the distance over to Santa Clarita, and almost as far as Santa Monica. Santa Maria, to Santa Barbara, to Santa Clarita, to Santa Monica... isn’t the California mission trail a wonderful collection of some of the great women saints of the church!

Of course, traveling conditions were a little different for Joseph and Mary back then, when all of it had to be done on foot along unpaved roads, or – if you were fortunate enough (or perhaps old enough, or young enough, or pregnant enough) – on the back of a donkey or in a small cart, and the only lights along the way came from the scattered villages you might pass through on your journey. It

was a sojourn fraught with dangers – from the vagaries of the weather, to the threats of highway robbers, to the visits of the wild animals of the night. Yes, indeed... this is the season for traveling – just as it was for the Holy Family so long ago.

My family and I will be traveling this holiday season as well. In a few days we'll be venturing away from the near summertime weather of the Central Coast up into the winter wonderland of Montana for the New Year's weekend. It's really more, though, than just the beginning of a new year that is taking us north. I have a niece who is being married there in just a couple of days now. I suppose that the week between Christmas and New Years is a perfectly logical time for a wedding. After all, both my parents and my in-laws got married in that narrow time-frame between those two great days of celebration. So, my niece and her fiancé choosing this coming week as their wedding date shouldn't come as a great surprise.

In reality, however, this is not exactly the time-frame that they would have chosen to be getting married. A few months ago, they discovered that they have a baby due in May, and that reality had a significant bearing on the timing of their wedding this coming week. Unplanned pregnancies tend to re-arrange one's calendar... and one's priorities... and one's life... in ways that one could scarcely imagine.

And that, too, is a part of tonight's story, isn't it? This trip for Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have been difficult enough... but then came a very unplanned pregnancy to throw a monkey wrench into all their plans. Of course, that's what Christmas is all about, isn't it... an unplanned and untimely pregnancy. However much we may want to sentimentalize, and romanticize, and

in doing so to minimize the human impact of the Christmas story, at its most basic and unvarnished level, Christmas is about how God really messed up the lives of a couple of unsuspecting Palestinians named Mary and Joseph... and in doing so, how God messed up the life of all creation.

You see, this “pregnancy thing” wasn’t in the cards. Whatever kind of lives Mary and Joseph might have imagined for themselves, it didn’t include this unscheduled side-trip to parenthood – much less this unscheduled side-trip to Bethlehem, just as Mary’s due date was drawing upon them. They had a plan, they had a roadmap for the future, and starting out their life together as a threesome rather than as a twosome just wasn’t a part of the deal. But apparently, whatever plans they had, God had something different in mind.

I have a sort of confession to make to you all this evening. I am the product of an unplanned pregnancy as well. Now, before you jump to any conclusions, I’m not talking about my parents here. When I was born, they’d been married for over six years, and were quite intentional about adding a second child to the mix, on the heels of my sister who is three years older than I. I am talking about a very different kind of unplanned pregnancy here.

You see, I am the product, the culmination if you will, of all of the experiences, all of the encounters, all of the relationships that have been a part of my life for my first 56 years. Some of these experiences – most, I’d say – were fairly conventional, a logical outcome of whatever it was which had preceded them. But while most of my life has unfolded in a fairly predictable fashion, there have been moments along the way where everything I thought was true about myself... who I was and where I was headed in life... was suddenly called into

question, and my life was turned into a tossed salad of mixed emotions, changing expectations, and an absolute and terrifying feeling of being totally out of control. At those moments, some part of me was born anew – unexpected, unwanted, and always unswervingly setting me on a path which I otherwise never would have taken.

I can only imagine that something similar must have happened in the lives of Joseph and Mary as they, each in their own way received a message... each in their own way became the product of an unplanned pregnancy... and then, each in their own way had to come to terms with the fact that their lives were about to change forever. Not only was Jesus born in a stable that night so long ago in Bethlehem. In a very real sense, both Mary and Joseph were born that night as well.

Is there some new life just waiting to be born in you? In this season of unplanned and untimely pregnancies, are you willing to risk the possibility that God might be at work in you, that the stirring you might occasionally feel deep within your soul – deep within your self – may be the work of the Holy Spirit bringing forth something new and different and unexpected... something that might even take your life in a whole new and unanticipated direction?

160 years ago, an Episcopal priest living in Philadelphia named Philips Brooks was inspired by a trip he had recently taken to the Holy Land, and returned home to pen the words to what would become one of our best-loved Christmas carols. As he had looked out over the ancient hills of Palestine one evening, the image of the small village below him was burned into his memory. And that vision was transformed into the words which began:

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.*

But for Brooks, the image was more than simply of a village where something life-changing had occurred 19 centuries earlier. For him, it was also an image of what God was still doing in the world. And so, he went on to write:

*O holy Child of Bethlehem descend on us, we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today  
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell  
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*

We all want so desperately to live neat and tidy lives, to find stability and constancy in our relationships, in our homes, in our churches, in our faith life. And then, once we feel like we're finally getting things under control, God comes along and messes everything up. As we celebrate Christmas this year, may God come in to your neat and tidy life, and mess everything up. And then, out of that mess, may new life come forth, may a baby be born, and we shall call him... Emmanuel.

Amen.