



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for Christmas Eve (11:00 p.m.)
St. Mark's on the Campus
December 24, 2006

EARLIER THIS WEEK, I found myself remembering my Christmas Eve sermon from *last* year. Not, of course, that Christmas Eve sermons were on my mind or anything like that!

We have two new kittens in our household, and as I was taking a picture of one of them peeking out of the middle of our Christmas tree, I remembered last year when in my sermon I mentioned how I was walking past our manger scene and noticed that we had a tiger standing among the other animals. Apparently felines at Christmas is a theme in our household! I can hardly wait to see what Christmas *2007* brings!

However, my sermon this evening is not going to be about cats and Christmas. Instead, I find myself thinking this year about hospitality. Most of us have hospitality on our minds in one way or another this time of the year. The root of the word is from the Latin, *hospitalis*, meaning "of a guest." Many of us are thinking of guests these days, whether we have guests coming into our homes and our lives or we're going to be guests in the homes and lives of others.

When we were living in Indianapolis, we used to open our home each Christmas to friends and parishioners, some of whom might otherwise have spent the holiday alone. Each year we would have a different group of guests, usually with some overlap from year to year, and everyone would bring something to share. Part of what they would bring was themselves, their own lives, their hopes and fears and dreams, their pain as well as their laughter. And because some people knew each other and others did not, there were occasionally some awkward moments. You know how it goes when we don't know each other. Have you ever been to a party and decided that such and such a person isn't going to be your conversation partner? At

other times, we feel stuck with somebody. Depending on how hospitable we feel, we might find some delightful things in very unexpected people. Of course, as the hosts of our party, Carol and I tried to create a space in which people felt at home, safe to be themselves, and I hope safe to be hospitable in return to each other.

So does any of this have anything to do with the theological significance of Christmas, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ which we celebrate tonight? Let me suggest that it does—in fact, quite a lot.

Let's begin with Mary, who—despite some significant inconvenience to herself (talk about an understatement!)—decides to make room within her life—within her very body—for a very special guest. Joseph, too, opens *his* life to some distinctly unexpected events and makes room for them. Unexpected events. An unexpected person. Coming to him by way of God—and by way of his beloved, Mary. Even the animals in the stable—both conventional ones like cows and donkeys and unconventional ones like tigers!—they, too, are asked to make room in their lives for God in ways that they would not have expected. There's that wonderful scriptural vision of God's reign in its fullness depicted by the lamb lying down with the lion. Expected enemies putting aside violence. Not for a temporary cease-fire, but for eternity. How unexpected, and yet how welcome, such hospitality would be.

It's ironic that we've just finished the Advent season, a time when we focus on anticipation and preparation—and yet now that the time has arrived, one of the inescapable themes of this evening is the *unexpected* nature of God's movement in the lives of Mary, Joseph, of these animals, in fact in the lives of all those who live into the fullness of God's reign.

Maybe it's inevitable, given the gap between ourselves and God, that even when we are looking for God's activity, just as people have looked for God's activity throughout history—when salvation arrives, it comes in some unexpected ways: Certainly that's true when God makes a covenant with a barren old couple named Abraham and Sarah; and it's true for the people of Israel, who are freed from Egypt but find themselves wandering for decades in the wilderness eating food that, after a while, seems to them like it comes from somewhere other than

heaven; and it's true when God's salvation comes from an unexpected source in Joseph, who returns to Israel as an official from Egypt of all places, full of forgiveness for the brothers who left him for dead—and with plenty of food for the Hebrew people.

And now God is up to those old tricks again, this time using the faith of a teenage girl and her fiancé to draw God's people back once again—and through them, to draw the whole world back to Himself. I found myself especially taken this year with the shepherds, out caring for their flocks, when the last thing they expect—an angel!—appears before them with some rather startling news: “Don't be afraid.” Uh-huh. Easy for an *angel* to say! And of course it's not the first time we hear these words. Earlier in the story, the angel says the same thing first to Mary and then later to Joseph, too: “Don't be afraid.” The unexpected in life often comes with a dimension of fear, maybe because when the unexpected happens, we're reminded that the illusion of control with which we usually live is really quite ephemeral.

Maybe those moments when we are most likely to be afraid—when someone we love develops cancer; when we find out we're losing a job; when we're not completely sure how our relationship with our spouse is going to be healed, nor how we ended up in this awful place to begin with—maybe it's *precisely* those moments when the unexpected strikes us, when we're reminded how vulnerable really are all the time—like a child in a crib—maybe it's *then* that we are most invited to look for God in places we do not necessarily expect to find Him: right there at the center of where we are vulnerable to the ways of life. Maybe those moments when we are most likely to be afraid are the ones which hold the greatest promise for us to make room for God in our lives in some new ways: ways in which we have never had to make space for God before.

A bit like Abraham and Sarah, who at such an advanced age must trust that God knows what He's doing by bringing a child into their lives. Or Moses and the people of Israel as they face Pharaoh and his armies, then the waters and the desert in their return to a faithful place. Or Mary, pregnant and alone, not sure at first what will happen to her; *will* Joseph abandon her? Or Joseph himself, who knows what his religious tradition tells him—it tells him to divorce

Mary right away! But Joseph hears God pressing him into a different direction. Or even like Jesus at the other end of his life, as he himself faces death and struggles to embrace it.

Moments when we are likely to *fear* are also those moments when we are confronted with whether or not we are going to trust God and make room for God working in our lives, even if we can't see how it could possibly be God. I think there's a lot of that going on in those simple words, "Mary treasured these words and pondered them in her heart." How could she not have wondered, "What is going on?" Ever asked yourself that question?

There's another dimension to all of this, though, and that is *God's* faith in all of *us*—which, really, is even more remarkable than *ours* in *God*. After all, God has an *inkling* of how Mary is going to respond—but how can God know for *sure* until Mary actually says yes—or Joseph? Or the shepherds, until they get up off the ground and head to the stable to see this outlandish thing that they've heard about? Or you, when God trusts *you* to have faith at those unexpected moments in life? God doesn't know for sure how we'll respond until we ourselves decide.

There's plenty of history that suggests to God that the human race can't be relied on to respond faithfully, hospitably, to the Holy Spirit moving among us. And yet, again and again, God continues to trust us; God trusts *us* to give flesh to the Spirit that dwells within us by His grace. Ultimately, the hospitality of Christmas is about God far more than it is about us. About the God who comes among us, full of grace and truth. Whatever happens. Whether or not we respond with a faith similar to the faith *God* has in *us*. Whether we say yes, or no. Whether we make space in our lives, or close the door, God keeps coming; God keeps knocking. God continues making room for us in all those unexpected moments, continues to trust us, continues to count on us, continues to forgive us—not because we've been either perfect guests in God's creation or perfect hosts to the Holy Spirit within us, but simply because God loves us and knows that in the mirror of our souls God sees His own image, the perfect image of Jesus Christ.

I pray that God may bless you richly this Christmas, as you make room for others in your life—for God in them—and as you give thanks for God making room for you in His. Amen.