

Every year, I wonder what part of the this story...the Christmas story...will touch my heart. What part of this story will have an impact on me long after the season of Advent and Christmas are done. What part of this story, or who - what character - will cause me to take a step back and ponder this story from a fresh perspective. Some years it has been Mary, a young Galilean girl pregnant and in a precarious position; unwed, growing up in a patriarchal society and pondering what it would mean for her to birth the one who would turn the world upside down. As a mother myself, I thought of the pangs of childbirth she would experience and the feeling of fear and uncertainty all bundled into one big unknown.

Other years, I resonated with Joseph - who oftentimes was considered an innocent bystander in all of this. In fact, the birth story in the gospel of Luke places very little emphasis on the men in the story. The words of wonder and awe belong to the women. But I wonder if Joseph felt the strain and shame of accompanying an unwed young girl on an arduous journey and needless to say... he had nothing to do with the pregnancy of the young woman he is accompanying, yet somehow responsible for her. And what role did his lineage play in this story? He was a descendant of David, it was imperative that he would be counted (as part of a census) in the city of David, Bethlehem. So as a member of a conquered people group, he was forced to travel about 90 miles to be counted for the census. A head count, so to speak, where the conquering empire might know just how many people it had available to tax. And the frantic activity he would face when he got to Bethlehem was a far cry from his quiet little town of Nazareth. I sense Joseph felt the weight of the world upon his shoulders.

And one year...it was the shepherds. The lowly, stinky shepherds on the outskirts of town. They were perhaps young boys and girls who stayed out all night protecting the sheep. But they...they are the first ones invited to the celebration of the divine birth...what a reversal. Then the Magi, or Wise Men that caught my eye in the storyline. You know...the three stately characters who are typically lined up neatly in a row facing the manger. I wondered that year, if they really were wise men. After all, these characters were of a subclass of Persian priests of great wealth and power and they knew that once they embarked on this journey, there was no turning back. They left job security behind and set off to see this "king." Incidentally, they came along much later in the story - after the birth. And then what did they do? Leave their adorned garments by the wayside and retreat to a sleepy little town in the west?

Then of course, there is the matter of the baby. Each year I ponder what the first Christmas felt like to the family. The midwives who most likely helped in the "delivery room," those who brought blankets and cleaned up. What was the waiting of that first Advent like for the people who longed for life to be different? Was "this" really the time when the prophet Isaiah's foretelling the future becomes a reality? What does hope *look like* for an oppressed people - over-taxed, overburdened, overwrought with injustice? What must it have felt like to long for a Messiah...and along comes this baby born in a stable? A baby? A baby who will have the authority (government) will rest upon his shoulders and endless peace with justice and righteousness leading the way.

And then, after the baby (or along with the baby) comes the innkeeper. The inn keeper - the one who sometimes gets a bad rap in this narrative because we often hear, "there's no room "at the inn." No room when a tired Mary and Joseph seek shelter and a place to rest from a journey they never imagined they would be taking. But in Luke's gospel the word, "inn" is translated as: kataluma

or guest room in the house. You see in Bethlehem, and I can attest to this firsthand, along with many of you who have traveled to the Holy Land, hospitality is of the utmost importance to family, friends and strangers. And the animals were often kept close to the family. So most likely, this stable accommodating Mary and Joseph and Jesus and the animals...was an extension of the home and an extension of the homeowner's hospitality. Everyone matters in the birth narrative.

So...every year..I wait and I wonder what part of this age-old story will grab a hold of me and *how* will it impact my life. What part of this narrative will I find comfort and hope and what part of this story or the people in it... will cause me to have more questions, than answers, and more doubt, at times, than certainty. So in the midst of all the preparations this year... I waited and I wondered... and I felt a bit of angst while writing this message for tonight because it felt like I hadn't "gotten it" yet. Why haven't I "felt it" yet? I've been trying so hard to find "it." "It - the moment which renews my passion and engages my wonder and touches my heart. And then I realized...perhaps surprised, that what has impacted me most about the story *this year* has been brewing within me, all... year... long.

I am compelled by the solidarity of God through the ordinary birth of Jesus. I am compelled by the fact that in the stable lies a God who is deeply embedded in solidarity with humanity. I am compelled by the solidarity of God that Pastor Munther Isaac, of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem speaks of when asked this question, "Where is God in all the suffering in our world? - and Pastor Munther's reply: God...is...in... the rubble. God, in solidarity with us... in our pain, our devastating diagnosis, our divorce, death, financial struggles, racial injustice, in the brutalities of war and in the times when our lives are a mess and we just can't seem to get it right. God, in solidarity with displaced people with a hometown too hostile to host them; God in solidarity with those who experience excruciating empires and economies from the position of the weak and powerless ones. And this Christmas...it is Bethlehem that lies quiet.

Hope, peace, joy and love...is the story of Christmas AND Advent. And we have this remarkable opportunity to join Jesus as incarnations and in solidarity of God's peace on this earth... for however long it takes. No one, from Mary and Joseph, to the innkeeper, to the shepherds, to the wise men, to the animals, to you and to me, is left out of this story. You see...there is *a/ways* room in the stable and there is always room at the table. So...where are you, tonight, in this story? Amen.