

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Silent Night” may be the most beloved hymn sung Christmas Eve, or the Eve of the Nativity of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is sung by millions of Christians world wide. All is calm. All is bright. The lyrics may be metaphorical...or may try to describe what it was like after everyone settled down for the night. All I know is that the hymn does not do the preacher any favor. What do I mean by that?

Well, the great challenge, requiring the highest skill of the preaching Christian, is to bring into real life today...today...the miracle of the Incarnation. We all sit here, reading and hearing the great birth story of Jesus of Nazareth, and generally think of it as a story of history. A dusty, moldy, somewhat mythical story of some romanticized birth of a common baby thousands of years ago that means “jack” to you and me today. Kind of like Columbus sailed the ocean blue, in 1492. That’s nice, but big deal. So what? Who really cares....because I do not see what it means to me, today in 2016.

All is calm. All is bright. Yeah? Where is that? See what I mean. No help from the hymn.

But here comes the story from St. Luke’s gospel, and we have a different picture. Forget “Silent Night”. The fact is that Bethlehem...on the night of the birth of Jesus...was crazy. An overcrowded, busy, noisy place. Full of turmoil and tension and uncertainty.

It was the government that messed it all up. Think about it. Your wife is nine-months pregnant, ready to birth any moment...and you both pick up and take off on a trip at the last minute? Keep in mind that this, for them, was not going off to Bethlehem for vacation. You or I...we take our families to Orlando, or Myrtle Beach, or some sunny, fun place....because we want to. We plan for it...booking the flights weeks, even months ahead. Scan for travel deals on-line. Call our travel agent for a break.

Not Bethlehem that night. The place is nuts. Overwhelmed. People pushing and shoving to get accommodations. The government orders everyone to go to their ancestral hometown to get registered for the census. And, because this is the first time it has been done, no one..not Joseph, not the innkeepers, and especially not the authorities...no one is prepared for the chaos.

It is not hard to imagine the panic. Think about it...sort of like last minute Christmas shopping in the malls...lots of pushing, anxiety, tension. Again, my job is to make this more real to you. So, what if our government made the same law? Is this area any different in that respect from Bethlehem? How many babies have been born right here in the nearby hospital? Hundreds? And it was worse than that because the decree was to return to your family’s ancestral home. We do not know if Joseph was actually born in Bethlehem...but rather only that he was of the ancient Jewish tribe of David. So, we are talking about hundreds, if not thousands more. So, in our case here, how long would it take before the motels in town were overwhelmed?

Imagine the pushing and shoving in the hotel lobbies. The arguments. The bidding for rooms.

Joseph would rather stay away and avoid all the drama. But he makes the trip, with her in complete discomfort and ready to deliver any moment, and both of them exhausted by the long trip from Nazareth.

They continue on...frightened to death by the Roman soldiers. They continue on....alone, without families or friends to guide or greet them upon arrival. They continue on...she in increasing pain, and he more worried for her....only to find “no vacancy” signs wherever they look for a room. No Silent Night here.

So, into this riot of disorganized noise and conflict and confusion, Mary’s time is up. Joseph somehow finds a smelly, old barn....just as crowded as the streets of Bethlehem, but with mules and cows and other farm critters. She grows louder with pain, so he hurries to find some clean straw and hay in the corner which he piles up to make her as comfortable as he can. And he carries her off the mule to that little hay stack, just in time. The time arrives...she gives birth to a baby boy.

And now...as the time arrives...time somehow stands still. It stops.

Time stands still for each of us. Into our crowded lives where there is no room, a child is born.

At this time of the year, we come here...to our Episcopal Church. Just like Joseph and expectant Mary, we come back. We come back here to take our own census. Come back to this place, one of many sacred places where our faith was born.

Joseph and Mary felt alone and helpless upon entering Bethlehem, his ancestral hometown. But many of us here...on this special time in life...remember back across the years. Memorialized in so many ways and small markers found throughout this church, or just etched in our hearts through the baptisms and weddings and funerals across the decades we have been blessed to celebrate, we rejoice...and find comfort to be with them here.

However, this is also the time that we also seem to remember what we would like to forget. Those broken places, the distant places of our relationships. The faces and names of those we said in anger we would never see or speak with again. Other occasions and examples of painful action, or inaction, in separation from each other.

Time again is stopped. Because now we have a child, given to us, to rebuild those shattered spaces, to bring closer those who are held at a distance. To restore us all within a healing love that we cannot understand or control, but we rush to its embrace anyway. Just like every baby ever born, this baby is no longer in his mother’s womb, but now let loose upon the world.

The silent night is coming to an end...brought to you by a child who only seeks to heal, and to give hope...and to lead each of us to come into the loving embrace of God, who we know to be in the Name given to us as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.