

## **JOSEPH'S PERSPECTIVE**

### *Sermon for Christmas Eve*

LPC, 12/24/12

What forms your mental picture of the first Christmas? Perhaps your mental picture is provided by picture books with radiant illustrations, or Christmas cards, or classical art, or manger scenes like this one, or perhaps children's pageants. All of these place a heavenly glow about the scene.

I read a commentary by the Rev. Sam Portaro last week that challenged this picture, particularly from the point of view of Joseph.

Imagine what it must have really been like for Joseph and his little family. The adoration of the shepherds may well have been quite lovely and peaceful, but many moments leading up to that scene must have been quite fraught.

Imagine receiving notice that you have to take a government-mandated trip with your girlfriend who is 9-months pregnant. Have you ever had to make any kind of trip with a woman who is 9-months pregnant, never mind a 70-mile trip more or less on foot? "Why now?" Joseph must have thought.

Then they reach their destination and there's no place to stay. I remember one road trip with my family when the kids were young. We were absolutely exhausted and tried one motel after the other, one highway exit after the other, with no luck. Evidently there was a huge convention or something. Eventually we pulled into a rest area and tried to sleep in the car, which quickly steamed up and became airless. It was horrible. We were so tired we all wanted to cry and of course took out our frustrations on each other. And here is poor Joseph under similar circumstances and meeting up with that "No Vacancy" sign. "What next?" he must have thought.

So they settle in a stable. We think of how charming that must have been. I'm sure well-kept stables are lovely for some people, but we have no idea what this stable was like. Stables can be really quite smelly and unhygienic places. You don't always know what's under every clump of straw. But at least Mary and Joseph are finally out of the weather. And Mary's contractions start. "Just hit me again," Joseph must have thought, if he could still think at all at that point.

The feelings I've described of frustration and despair may seem to have no place on a joyous Christmas Eve, but I don't imagine they were completely absent that first Christmas. And the message from that insight to us tonight is, take heart. If you've come here tonight with anything less than a ho-ho-ho in your heart, if you're anxious, preoccupied, grieving, detached or depressed, or if you've ever been those things, there is room for you in this manger. There was room for Joseph.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

From the vantage of history and or our faith, we know now how the first Christmas fits into Salvation History. We have the advantage of knowing how it all came out. Joseph would not have had that advantage.

This can be a sign unto us whenever we're inclined to say, "Why now?" or "What next?" or "Just hit me again." God is with us. If the coming of Jesus into the world as a human being means anything, it means that. In the middle of things we have no idea how they can possibly work out. But somehow, in time, they will. And throughout that process, God will be at our side today and forever even when things are as exasperating as they must have been for poor Joseph.

"Why now?" we may ask, and the answer is likely to be, as it was for Joseph, "Why not now? The time is always right for the fulfillment of God's purposes."

"What next?" we may ask, and the answer is likely to be, as it was for Joseph, "Something else. But God can use this to further God's work to redeem the universe. God wastes nothing."

"Just hit me again," we may say, and the answer is likely to be, as it was for Joseph, "Don't be afraid. I am with you. I will be with you always, to the end of the age."

Back in the stable, the baby is finally born. Joseph must feel the relief of every new father who sees his beloved safely delivered of a healthy infant. In his relief, does he now remember the weird and wonderful promises God has made to him? They are coming true before his eyes! Can Joseph now give in to a wave of quiet joy and thanksgiving?

It's Christmas. Whatever you have brought to this point, pause in this holy space. Remember the weird and wonderful promises God has made to you. They are coming true before your eyes! You can now give in to a wave of quiet joy and thanksgiving.