



## Christmas Eve, Year A – December 24, 2010

Luke 2. 1-14

### A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

It had been a busy day. Actually, come to think of it, it had been a busy month. He'd been doing this for over twenty years. Twenty some years of answering every call, anticipating every need, waking before the dawn and falling exhausted into bed long after the moon was past the point of its rising.

But these past few days had been exceptionally busy. They were a blur of fetching, of rushing, of 'yes sirs' and 'right away ma'ams'. The moon on this night was somewhere beyond the horizon and as the innkeeper ran outside on one last errand, dreaming of the moment when he could finally collapse onto his meagre bed, it occurred to him that the stars were especially bright.

As soon as the thought entered his mind it passed. When he had finished his chores he walked – no – stumbled back to his home and finally, blissfully fell into his bed. The deep, steady breathing of sleep had already begun when his wife's voice broke in through the descending blackness. Another guest, what must we do? He burrowed down deeper under the blankets wishing, praying even, that the sound of her voice would soon stop. He barely noticed when one of his covers was ripped unceremoniously from his sleeping body. Sleep, deeper and deeper he sank into a black and dreamless state and at last, his day was done.

It was the quiet that woke him. When he opened his eyes there was not a noise, not a sound. There was something about this silence that was different than the usual midnight quiet; it was weighted somehow. He knew that it was still night because the sounds of activity, washing and cooking and talking, were notable by their absence. He was, amazingly, fully awake. He threw his arm to the other side of the mat and was surprised to feel that it was empty. His wife mustn't have made it to bed. Curious now he raised up his body, achy from the day's physical demands, and walked to follow the silence.

We know, having heard this story told and retold year after year what he found. He arrived to find a baby, laying in a manger, wrapped in the blanket that had been torn from his sleeping body, with an exhausted and elated mother nearby. He arrived to hear the baby being called "Emmanuel" meaning "God with us". It was not that there were guests staying in the stable or the unexpected arrival a baby, or even that the baby was surrounded with the warmth of the animals that surprised the innkeeper. No, none of these things caught him off guard.

What surprised him were the other guests who had arrived. Standing close by, standing in reverence, were shepherds who still smelled of the night air and who had come in from the fields. And beside them were three well-to-do, royally clad men.

In his mind the innkeeper snapped to attention in anticipation of their demands that were sure to come. It was not often that the wealthy came to him but whenever they did their needs were endless. But not tonight. Tonight they stood along side a group of shepherds, the stable boys and the kitchen help, all standing facing the infant there in the manger.

No one spoke. The silence was not really silence after all – the sounds of shuffling feet and braying livestock had just faded into the background. Somehow this child, this innocent little infant had performed a miracle – his arrival had, if only for a moment, united people from all walks of life. The richness of the purple robes worn by the Magi contrasted against the earth tones of the shepherds shabby clothes. The shades came together in the shimmering light of the starlit night and in

that place, in that moment every one present were just simply, people. People who in their humility; in their humanity had all come to give thanks, to praise God, to present gifts to the promised one. They had come to honour the arrival of the one who had been foretold but who had not, as some expected, arrived in armour on a horse but who had arrived in the form of an infant. A helpless child had become the great equalizer. In that moment, in that time, the "things" of humanity, the "possessions" that define who we are – disappeared and everyone became one humanity, one being in the presence of this baby.

The innkeeper, beyond his exhaustion and with tears in his eyes, stood watching the scene. Alongside the poor, the rich and the working class he stood in awe at the presence of this baby; this Emmanuel - God in the world to live among them.

Some years ago I heard Marcus Borg speak about the stories of the Bible – you know, the stories that people point at and say "that's impossible," or "there are differing accounts so it can't be believed." How Marcus replied was, "I don't know if it really happened that way or not, but I know it to be true."

The story that I just told had the wise men, or the Magi, present at the birth of Christ. Conversely, the Gospel that we heard tonight had the shepherds in the field being told about the birth of a baby and then travelling to see the infant for themselves. Because these two accounts, one from Luke and one from Matthew, do not tell exactly the same story am I to discount them both?

No, because I know them to be true. I know that God sent Jesus into the world to be a beacon of light and a sign of hope and to save the world from itself. I know it to be true that on a night long ago people from all walks of life realized that a gift had been given to them – not in the form of a conquering hero but in the form of an infant who would grow to be king.

The point is that it doesn't matter whether there were shepherds or Magi or both. The point is that it doesn't matter whether there was a special celestial event that pointed the way to a stable or whether it was just a starry night. The point is that it doesn't matter whether the angels sang or the innkeeper cried.

I don't know if it really happened that way or not, but I know it to be true.

The point is that as we celebrate the gift of God's unimaginable, incomprehensible love for us as demonstrated in the birth, the life, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are called to remember that we stand alongside the Magi and the shepherds, the stately and the lowly, the wealthy and the poor, the worthy and the wanting.

And as we do so we remember that the "things" that divide, the "possessions" that define us, fall away in the presence of the Messiah, the Christ, the baby born in a stable and laid in a manger.

I don't know if it really happened that way or not but I know that on that night long ago and again on this night in 2010, Christ our Saviour is born and we shall call him Emmanuel, Jesus, Messiah.

And for the gift of the baby in the manger, thanks be to God.