

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

When I was a kid, my parents moved us from northern Minnesota to southern Minnesota, about 350 miles from my dad's parents, about 500 miles from mom's parents. It didn't matter though what the weather was like, the condition of the roads, that we didn't have interstate highways back then, somehow we always managed to spend Christmas with one set of grandparents or the other. Aunts and uncles and cousins all gathered under one roof, many spending the night with grandma and grandpa, others staying with whatever family lived closest. I know my parents spent many holidays sleeping on fold-out couches, I spent many holidays sleeping on floors surrounded by cousins, camping out indoors. Somehow we always had enough room as the extended family came together.

However. Mary and Joseph were faced with a dilemma, they didn't have extended family, they didn't have friends or relatives in Bethlehem, there was no one to take them in, no fold-out couches either. In our Christmas gospel this evening we read that Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Now when the shepherds found the baby Jesus in the manger, they didn't find grandparents, aunts and uncles, or any extended family helping out with the newborn infant. They found a young mom doing as best she could, and a somewhat older dad trying to provide for his family. The two of them and Jesus were left to fend for themselves, although there may have been some other folks around as our gospel reads "all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them."

Now this makes me think of Jesus' words in Matthew 25: "for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." There is poignancy to these words, for Mary and Joseph were strangers, pretty much left to fend for themselves. There was no room anywhere for the God incarnate, a pregnant girl and her betrothed had makeshift shelter and a manger for their newborn son.

But the Christmas story is a story of good news of great joy, great joy for all people whether on their own or surrounded by family and loved ones. It's not just about presents and good food, and worship as a family. It's joyful because in a world where there was no room for a couple with a soon-to-be-born baby, God gave the world the greatest, the best present of all.

God gave the Incarnate Son, the Word of God, the Word became flesh, and our Savior came to a young unwed mother, God's Word was revealed to shepherds who were among the more despised of the people of that day.

God became human in lowly unexpected circumstances, and there is a wondrous poignancy in that incarnation because it means that we, you and I, are loved and known by our Creator God, whether you are staying in a crowded house tonight and sleeping on a fold-out couch, or all by yourself. God with us, Immanuel! Mary and Joseph may have been alone and on their own that night, but we are not on our own. The true gift and meaning of Christmas is that we are not forgotten nor forsaken for God is with us.

Mary and Joseph were without status, connections, money, power. They had nothing to offer but themselves given in love. Love that is what our Father in Heaven had in mind all along. And here you and I gather in the light of the Father's love, and we are challenged by God's vision of what could become in the Word made Flesh. The universe could not contain that baby in a manger, yet he comes to us tonight in the Word, in the bread and wine of communion, and we, starry-eyed at Christmas are again challenged to see how our Lord also comes to us in the people around us, family or not. And this vision of the Christ child is good news of great joy for all people!

AMEN