

Holy Spirit Church, Bellmawr
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Merry Christmas! We celebrate this night the glory of God's coming to us, the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus. This night begins the story of which we are part ... a story that begins in Bethlehem and ends in Calvary. Isaiah proclaims tonight that something great is happening. Titus tells us that renewal and regeneration are taking place this night. Luke tells us that the angels proclaim good news to the shepherds; they listen to the astounding news and then go to Bethlehem to seek the miracle that has taken place. But the story doesn't stop there ... the shepherds proclaim to all whom they meet the Good News!

Tonight the story is about God's love for us. It is a love that seeks us out, that has the power to transform us, and that will conquer all fear and even death. This love story is our story as well! The Good News is that Jesus is born and that we have hope! Christmas is the story of God's love seeking us out, first in the birth of a child. God comes into our midst as one of us ... to love us, to save us and to point us towards a new reality, a new life, a new hope!

Tonight is a good night for love stories. I'm not talking just about Clement Moore's, "Twas the Night Before Christmas" or Dr. Suess', "The Grinch That Stole Christmas." I'm talking about the every day stories of God's coming into our lives and making a difference. One such story comes from an article I read in "Guideposts" magazine more than 20 years ago. It's about a boy, a Christmas pageant, and the way that God's love can transform us this evening.

Ralph was not your typical child. He was big for his age, and very slow. But he had parents who loved him and tried to make life as normal and happy as possible. When December came, they approached Mary at Church, the Christmas pageant director. They asked that Ralph be included in the play for Christmas Eve. Mary agreed to include Ralph.

Ralph was given a simple role, that of the innkeeper in Bethlehem. Mary took a chance and gave Ralph a simple line to say. She had no idea what she started by assigning that role to this child. Rehearsals went pretty well ... or as well as can be expected when you have masses of children, Christmas excitement and too much sugar from candy and cookies! Ralph had a simple part in the play. When Mary and Joseph came to the door of the inn in

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Bethlehem, he was to open the door, listen to their request and say, “No! There is no room in the inn! Go!” Simple ... right?

The big night came. The Church was packed with parents, children, grandparents, family and friends. Mary was nervous; she always was ... even though this was probably her 20th pageant! The candles were light; the choir began their singing. The children fussed in the hall ... waiting to be called into the chancel for their part. Ralph was dressed in his robe and headpiece. He said he knew his lines. His mom and dad sat in the front pew. All was set!

The Christmas story unfolded. There was the annunciation, angels and a marvelous pronouncement of a miracle unfolding. Ralph took his place behind the crudely constructed door. Mary and Joseph made their way to the inn in Bethlehem. Joseph knocked on the door. Ralph, the innkeeper, opened the door. He looked at Joseph. Joseph spoke, “Please sir. We are looking for a room. We have traveled far, and my wife is with child. It is her time. Please sir, could we have a room?”

Ralph stood there staring at Joseph. His eyes moved to Mary, her eyes cast down, a sad look upon her face. And it happened ... Ralph just stood there ... and said nothing. The silence was too much for Mary, from the side door she whispered, “Ralph ... No! There is no room in the inn! Go!” But poor Ralph just stood there ... silent ... gazing upon Joseph and Mary. Mary whispered even louder, “Ralph! No! There is no room in the inn! Go!”

Ralph snapped out of his trance ... he blinked and the words finally came. He looked at Joseph and said, “No! There is no room in the inn! Go!” Joseph looked beaten and dejected. He turned and put his arm around Mary and they begin to move off. Ralph was supposed to close the door and leave, but he just stood there ... staring after the Holy couple as they moved off.

Ralph finally blurted out, “No! Wait! Come back! You can have my room!” The whole Church fell into a deep, profound silence at that moment. A miracle happened. People still talk about that pageant, and Ralph, and how it made their Christmas different, better ... for you see, the Incarnation took place in a powerful way that night. Ralph made room in his heart for God ... and God took up residence in his life. It was the best Christmas pageant ever.

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The question for us tonight is whether we will make room for Christ in our lives. It's easy to get caught up in the commercialization of this season and lose sight of what Christmas is all about. It's easy to think Christmas is just about warm, fuzzy feelings or just for kids ... and forget that the birth of Jesus is a life-changing event for all of us. Christmas is about God coming into our lives, interrupting us, changing us. That's what happened to Ralph and the audience that night at the pageant.

In all the busyness of this season, have we made room for the Christ child in our life tonight? With all the presents, all the decorations, all the food, have we opened our hearts to receive the gift of God's love? This is real good news! Christmas is the start of a new life that God offers us ... because God loves us! The story tonight talks about the joy of a child given as a GIFT ... not a reward. We have done nothing to deserve this gift. We have the gift of Jesus in our lives because God loves us so deeply ... more than we could ever imagine.

There is so that threatens us this year. The economic downturn is scary. People are losing their jobs and their homes. The war continues. Retirement and college savings have disappeared. The world is filled with bad news and things look bleak. It's into this world, our world, that God comes bringing hope. It's into the midst of our darkness that God brings light by the birth of a child, Jesus. It's love that comes for us ... a love that has the power to make all things new, to banish death, to rise up hope in us. Christmas is the reminder that God loves us so much that God would send us God's son ... Jesus.

Ralph experienced the love and was transform by the miracle of Jesus' birth. He made room for him in his heart ... he offered up his own room. We now are the innkeepers ... and Joseph and Mary come to us, bearing the Christ child with them. God stands at our door asking to come into our hearts and lives ... let's make room to receive them with joy! Merry Christmas!