

The Church telephone rang and the Receptionist transferred the call saying: I don't recognize the name. I answered and the caller described herself as a reporter wondering if we were having Christmas? I responded "CANCEL CHRISTMAS!!! That only happens on television shows! Of course the Church is celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ!" She replied that with COVID a number of neighboring churches had closed, in fact this was her first assignment, and after calling a number of churches ours was the first which took her call and IS Gathering on Christmas Eve. I responded that there is rightly a great deal of fear this Christmas, but having endured this disease, most of our community had listened and gotten vaccinated: primarily out of concern for others, but also as uncomfortable as they are, everyone including our choir wear masks. I encouraged her to read the newspaper articles that had appeared earlier this year about what we had done to be able to be able to worship together throughout the Pandemic, before writing her article.

She inquired if we have a number of visitors at Christmas, and what we do to encourage visitors coming? Last Saturday we had a Concert because for over 300 people, Music is their access into Christmas. Tuesday we had a Longest Night Service, because especially this year, many of us are feeling grief and sadness over what has been lost, and are searching for HOPE. At 4pm we shared Lessons and Carols, as some enjoy simply hearing the Christmas story read and sung. At 7pm we had a full Traditional worship service with our Choir, Candlelight and Communion to celebrate the birth of the Savior. We try in all these ways, because everyone is different, and we all come to God at differing times in our lives.

The reporter asked if we had ever done anything different from other churches to attract strangers? I described that the purpose for Churches is not about advertising, but listening to people's needs. In Green Valley, we do not have a great number of children, but in other places where there were, our Early service had been a Pajama Service, where I wore pajamas and a bathrobe over my clothes, and children from across the community and visitors all were invited up onto the Chancel like a Neighborhood Slumber Party where we told Christmas stories and THE Christmas story, then went back to sit with Moms and Dads and Grandparents as we passed the candlelight and sang Silent Night. Parents would leave saying "Thank you" because they were able to celebrate all their memories and the kids were now ready for bed! Then, we would have our Traditional Worship Service and Communion that ended at Midnight, and in many places we were the only church in several states which still celebrated a Midnight Mass. However, in Green Valley that was not realistic as many go to bed at 9pm.

Providing a thorough interview, the Reporter asked: "Does your message change on Christmas Eve?" I said "Not really. Our message is always: **No matter who you are, what has happened, you are loved.** Some of us know the old story, but have never had room for the child of God to be born in us, until now. Some are waiting for a new time when Christ will come. But the meaning of Christmas is that God does come, to us all. **That neither the fears of strangers, the fear of authorities, the fears of disease, not even death can stop the love of God trying to get through to us.** At differing times of year our emphasis shifts from God attempting to find room in our busy lives, to forgiveness, but the heart of the message: the love of God is the same. No matter what, no matter who you are, you are loved and cared about."

The reporter asked: "And if a visitor questions whether there is a God, what would you say?" I would ask if this gathering, the people sharing together, the words that were said and the music, had resonated with them? If they felt welcome and connected with people in this community? I hope they would come again, because they are wanted and needed here."

“And if they do not believe they will be wanted?”

This is the heart of Christmas...

That in one of the most oppressive brutal times in history, specifically the time of Caesar Augustus (the Emperor whom everyone anticipated would save them from the problems of the Roman Empire), instead created a Census in order to Tax them... Not a Census where someone knocks at your door, not a Census you can fill out by Mail, because there were no Public Mails.

Instead every person was required by the Government to leave your life, your business, responsibilities, because you were told to travel to your ancestral home, for the sake of Your being counted as being a possession of the Empire. This is not “A Religion about Universal Truths and Philosophy”, but historically grounded in people and events just like surrounding our lives. Few among us will be remembered by all the world, and in that ancient time, in the small town of Bethlehem, in the Roman territory of Judea, a Carpenter from Nazareth and his young pregnant fiancé arrived for the Census to discover there was not even a fold-out couch, or floor for them, and yet this Night is the origin of caring and love.

We believe we will not be wanted (?)...

Imagine a time and place where the world was so overcrowded, the only place for this unwed mother to give birth was in a stable! We are not talking about the pristine stalls at Churchill Downs, Kentucky, but a filthy place with a cold dirt floor, a manure covered cow, a mange donkey, and few chickens and sheep. What an offense to the senses! Lumber was far more expensive and scarce in Israel than even our world today, so the Animals’ Feed Trough/ their Manger would not have been carved of wood as a Cradle in Western Europe, but chiseled out of cold stone. What a contrast between a stone animal’s feed trough, and a swaddled new born placed to rest.

Try to imagine the confusion of this young mother: too young to understand what was happening to her as she gave birth to a baby, and as she cradled this child, her child is THE Incarnation of God in the world! God wants you, loves you so much that God changed reality becoming human for you!

There is a subtlety to language, when the Bible describes the setting as that of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was Governor of Syria, the verbs are all in the past tense “In those days” “A decree Had Gone out” “And all went to be enrolled”.

But when the Angels describe to the Shepherds the Birth of the Savior, everything changes to the present, here and now “BE NOT AFRAID, I Am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people, to you is born this day, in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!”

Unwanted?

According to the Angels’ testimony this is THE EVIDENCE that there is a Savior, proof of the LOVE of God, that they (the common shepherds) would find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger! All across the world that night, every night of all the years ever since then, how many poor families have been thankful to find anywhere to place their child, anything to swaddle them with. AND that image is declared as Proof of God with Us. ACTUALLY, I defy even the greatest skeptic among us, to hold an infant in their arms, to look into their eyes recognizing the unconditional trust and love, and not believe God is With Us.

At least that is what I would have wanted to say to the reporter... Instead, when this stranger asked if there is a God? I responded by inviting her to come join us.