

December 24, 2008

Christmas Eve, Year B (Luke 2:1-20)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

A few years ago my aunt gave us a really fun gift. It is an Advent calendar unlike any I had seen before. The center nativity scene, blank but for the stable and stars painted on, is surrounded by twenty-four little numbered boxes each with a tiny little door. Inside each door is a character from the story with a magnet on its back for us to stick into place.

The creators of this little calendar are very creative since there aren't exactly twenty four characters in the real story. In our little scene, in addition to the usual cast, there are several sheep, a camel for each wise man, extra stars for the night sky and a whole herd of cattle.

With a two year-old running the show, you can imagine that we've had some creative scenes in the last twenty four days. There's been a cow on the roof of the stable, a sheep in the manger and for a while a shepherd stood in for one of the wise men.

But our little scene is filling in, one by one. It is getting really crowded. All the little wooden actors are taking their magnetic places as we counted down the days until the most important one arrived this morning from the little box marked "24". We moved the sheep out of the manger and put the little baby Jesus magnet in its proper place.

So here we are. The labor pains are through, the baby has been born. The star has come out to guide the wise men with their gifts for the Savior. Now that the pieces are all out of their box, the story is complete.

The next step is to pack them all back in their little boxes and put them back in the attic until next year.

Or is it?

Advent is about waiting for the baby, about preparing ourselves for the announcement of what is to come. Advent is about anticipation and expectation and preparation.

We spend four weeks waiting to sing the Christmas carols, waiting to hear the story as told by our Gospel writer, waiting to light that last candle on the wreath, waiting to get the baby Jesus out of the box.

And then, Christmas is here! We are engulfed for a moment in generosity and excitement, in feelings of fulfillment and of presence.

And then it is over.

We pack away the Advent wreath and the nativity scenes and the angel costumes and forget about the anticipation and the exultation for another year.

But what if we don't this year? What if, instead of putting it all away, what if we keep it out? What if we wear that exultation, generosity and excitement all year long, even through Holy Week, even through Good Friday. What if we keep the baby Jesus on the mantel piece of our hearts to remind us that this event, this wild and incredible love, this hitherto unheard of extravagance, this INCARNATION, God made flesh, EMMANUEL, God with us.

What if we refuse this year to let Christmas end? If we were to live in a way that reflected God's generous incarnational love to us all year, would we begin to remember that however beautiful, the end of Christmas carols is not the end of the story?

Would we be able to weather personal crises, financial meltdowns, wars and disasters with God-given grace and fortitude?

Would we be able to look evil in the eye and let it know, in no uncertain terms, that it has been vanquished and by a baby, no less, as soft and helpless as any born?

Would we be able to do it in January? And in May? And in September?

Can we keep Christmas, real Christmas, all year?

God is here, my friends. God has been held in our arms, rocked to sleep by our songs. God has walked our roads and eaten our food. The promise of God incarnate is that even when the candles are extinguished, even when the nativity pieces are put away and the calendar pages are turned to a new season, God will be with us.

Now comes the challenge of our part: to remember that presence throughout the year, to remember Emmanuel, to make the elation of the young mother our own elation and to make the awe of the shepherds ours as well, long after the stores have moved on to Valentines and marshmallow bunnies.

Our challenge is to carry that elation and awe into a world hurting for it, and to use it as a balm all year, to heal and to uplift, to feed and clothe and love. And if we accept our challenge, the world will hurt a little less.

"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 the Messiah, the Lord."