

December 24, 2012

Christmas Eve

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

Whew. We did it! We made it to yet another Christmas.

The pageant yesterday was just as lovely and blessedly chaotic as ever, a perfect rendition of the messy untamed humanity into which our Savior was born. For those of you for whom children's pageants aren't your thing, and for those of you who just missed the 9am service yesterday, here's the recap:

John the Baptist, in his belted robe, prophesied the coming of Jesus. Joseph escorted Mary down the aisle and they were soon followed by the remarkably well behaved Baby Jesus. For a moment, we sang "What child is this?" and it was fairly calm. Then came the angels, flapping their little wings and readjusting their tilting halos, all jockeying to get a good look at the baby. "Gloria in Excelsis," we sang to them! The shepherds came next, in bathrobes and with stuffed sheep tucked under their arms. And, as animals so often bring chaos to the party, the whole barnyard came mooing and braying forward as the angels scooted to make room. The star and several-more-than-three wise folk rounded out the wiggly, whispering bunch.

I admit, I have long since believed that the All Saints' Christmas pageant is a more honest rendition of the nativity night than any renaissance painting. The littlest ones aren't entirely sure what's going on, the angels' wings are poking the magi in the eyes, the hay gets trampled on. Everyone is a little confused and entirely joyful. It is full of imperfection, of excitement, of hope.

It is a great story, this one. It has something for everyone. There is mystery, confusion, intrigue, a baby and animals and angels. Good stuff!

But you know, and I know that this is more than just a good story. You know, and I know that this is more than just God having a baby. This story is more than a sum of its parts.

I have had a great gift this year. I have had the lovely opportunity to spend some time with a couple of different people who are brand new to Christianity and eager to learn. While I have had many conversations with folks that lapsed and are coming back or coming from another denomination, I can't remember ever getting the opportunity to talk about the stories of my faith to folks with no prior knowledge. My conversations with them have helped me look again with fresh eyes at the foundational stories of who we are.

I was reminded in the course of these conversations that the nativity is an absurd story. It makes no sense at all. But that is part of the beauty of it. Life rarely

does. If God can make sense out of magi, sheep and babies, then there is no limit to what God can and will do for us.

Fear not, cry the angels. God is here.

There is no darkness that God cannot overcome.

There is no mind so fractured that God cannot inhabit it.

There is no heart so broken that God cannot mend it.

There is no government so big that God can be disinvited from it.

There is no child so scared that God will not enfold her.

There is no territory so dangerous, no situation so abysmal, no circumstance so horrifying that God will not be there, alongside the frightened, the abused, the joyful, the sick, the angry, the content, the distraught. .

There is no feeding trough so lowly that God will refuse to be born there.

That is what this story tells us. God. Is. Everywhere.

I will be the first to admit that sometimes God is hard to see. The brokenness and ugliness can cloud our clear sight like frost on the windshield, making us dangerous to ourselves and others.

It can be hard work to see God in the world around us. God's presence is often not so obvious as virgin birth and guiding stars. It is more likely to be found in the teacher who unlocks the mystery of reading to his kindergarten class; in the doctor who stays in the room a few extra minutes after giving a difficult diagnosis; in the cashier who smiles all the way to the end of her shift; in the mother who stays up all night with a feverish child.

God is found wherever light breaks in, casting out darkness.

Look in the manger: God is there, tiny and fragile, but infinite and powerful. Impossible and True. That is the promise of this story. If we can believe that God can be born into such miserable conditions, we can believe that God can be here, too. Fear not, the little angels cry, Emmanuel, God is with us.