

“Softly, Tenderly” – Luke 02:07 - Christmas Eve, 2013

Once again we have heard the familiar words of the Christmas Story told both in scripture and in song. We love the story and we can probably recite most of it from heart, for it is a story of love, a tale of heavenly love that covers all of creation and Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus is an especially tender and intimate story, isn’t it? In only a few words we have the complete picture of a young couple becoming parents while far from their home. In that moment, fear and uncertainty changed to joy and rejoicing, as a child is born, and is lovingly touched, wrapped in warm dry cloths and laid in a soft bed of sweet-smelling hay. A young woman gives birth, and their lives are touched forever.

That birth was on the one hand completely normal, similar to thousands that had happened that year. A baby was born to an ordinary family. These were not people of great wealth, although they might have been able to afford accommodation at the inn had there been space available for them. They were apparently quite ordinary people, although we don’t know much about them from scripture. Some assume that the husband was a carpenter, because the son born in the stable was later referred to as a carpenter, but we really don’t know for sure. What we do know from scripture is that they had to make a difficult journey to satisfy yet another edict from those who implemented the power of the empire of the day, and on that journey gave birth to a baby, and cared for the newborn son with tender and loving care.

And already there was a small but powerful sign that as ordinary as this birth was, it still heralded something different – profoundly different, even – from the world into which this baby was born. That world was a world not so different from our own: it was a time when people found ways to exercise personal power through economic and political oppression. It was a time when might and power and weaponry and warfare determined who would make the rules and who would suffer under them. It too was a time like today, when wealth was seen as a substitute for character, when power was considered a better alternative to compassion, a time when taking overruled giving.

But into that world of oppression and deception, of cruelty and abuse, came a small gift from God for the ages, a gift that represented all that was good, all that was holy, and a gift that would last forever. Kingdoms would come and go, and still do. Empires would rise and fall, and still do. Evil dictators would come and go, and still do. Smarmy politicians and greedy economic barons climbing on the backs of the poor and the ordinary would come and go, and still do. But the gift of love from God made manifest in that child born in Bethlehem has come, and has stayed. True love lived out in caring and compassionate deeds still endures. The holy act of self-sacrifice so exemplified by that baby’s death and resurrection still reflects the call from God for people of faith to live lives full of justice and mercy.

In this ordinary yet extraordinary birth God came to dwell in the flesh with the people of the world. This was the moment of “Immanuel – God with us” experiencing life as we do in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed One. People could no longer complain that God was somehow remote, stand-offish, unable or unwilling to truly feel their pain. Now, in the person who would come to be recognized as one with the Father and in whom the Father could be found, God was – and continues to be – fully among us.

And so on this night of nights, recognizing God among us, we join the long line of people from across the ages as we in turn come to witness and worship; we come to pay our respects at the feet of the Holy Child who came that we might have life, abundant and eternal. The Holy Child, the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Son of the Most High, Jesus, our Lord and our King. As we come before Him, once again hear the story, let it wash over you, fold the story

into your heart and your DNA, remember with great fondness that young couple who offered themselves in God's service, and above all embrace each other with the love that the Holy Child proclaimed with his birth, his life, his death and his rising again victorious. Celebrate the birth of Christ in your hearts as well, preparing Him room, and experiencing in Him the presence of God near you, the touch of God healing you, the gracious power of God restoring you and uplifting you, until at last we all shall be gathered with all the saints into His loving arms for all time.