

Christmas Eve
Year C – Revised Common Lectionary
December 24, 2009
St. James' Episcopal Church, Pullman, WA
The Rev. Mary Beth Rivetti, Rector

Luke 2:1-20

A couple of Sundays ago, three of us went to see the Nativities exhibit at one of the Moscow wards of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I hadn't expected to participate, and I was certainly bowled over by the sheer overwhelming collection of nativity sets. On loan from members of their ward, and even from other churches who had made donations, the exhibit filled the ward gymnasium – tables around each wall, and a central set of tables – about 50 in all – each filled with nativity sets of every size and medium. Classical sets, intricate whirligigs, kitschy Peanuts collections, abstract art, fabric weaves, wood shavings, sterling silver, salt-and pepper shakers, teeny retablos from Peru, olive-wood from the holy land - sets from every imaginable corner of the globe. Dominating the entire display was a magnificent 1/10th scale Fontanini set, complete with scenery, Judean hillsides, with little settlements in the hillsides – shelters for the shepherds out with their flocks, caravansarais with elaborate furnishings sheltering the strangers traveling along the silk road to follow the star, Roman encampments, villagers in Bethlehem going about their business, shopkeepers, innkeepers, and finally the holy place itself, the eye at last finds its home, the stable with the holy family huddled against farm animals for comfort and shelter.

It was astounding. I stood there for a very long time, drinking it in. Came back several times to stand in front of it. You won't see anything more remarkable outside of the life-sized model that adorns the Vatican this season. I cannot imagine how immense an undertaking it would be to house that set – to put it away, or even find a way to store it. And the Fontanini sculptures are the classic models for all of our lesser sets, including my molded plastic set that we use at the Children's service when we recreate that scene we all have come to know so well.

The first crèche was fashioned by St. Francis of Assisi as a preaching tool, as he struggled to find a way to bring home to his congregation the immediacy of the incarnation. Francis' version was a bit like the living version our friends at Living Faith have on display, or we used to visit when I was a child at the Mission in Santa Barbara. And Francis stood in the midst of the display, using the manger as his altar – bringing in the connection that this is not just a marvelous birth that we celebrate, but the end of our separation from God, the reconciling act of incarnation, the mystic communion that allows us to reach up to heaven as heaven reaches down to us in the body and blood of Christ.

The Fontanini display points out the beauty of Luke's telling. The world full of its comings and goings. The power of the age on display with marching soldiers and imperial decrees. A whole world on the move. And there in the bottom corner of the action, set back from the traffic, quietly, the miracle unfolds. And up there on that hillside, in a burst of light, the whole army of heaven appears to the least likely of people – not soldiers, not potentates, not ambassadors of the emperor in Rome, the one who is called the Son of God and the Savior of the World – No - the angels appear to shepherds. And because the story of salvation is proclaimed to a peasant girl in Nazareth, and to shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem, because the good news comes first to the least likely, then WE get included, too. We are embraced in this good news, we get to be filled with the wondrous story, we get to come up and re-fashion that creche ourselves, and look with care at all the fine details. We are invited here to the place where Jesus lay, where he laid out his body and blood for his friends and for us. We are invited here to come and see.

This afternoon, as Carol and I were engaging in the inevitable yearly struggle with the technology of reproducing your worship booklets, I dashed over to the rectory to grab a box of staples. As I came back over, a Pullman police car pulled up in haste, and two armed officers stepped out. Is there a problem? I asked, wondering what could have happened in two minutes. Officer Bell, whom I recognize from my regular trips to Starbucks with our junior warden, Fritz Hughes, told me he hoped there was no problem but “the reason we're here with our guns drawn...” And drawn they were, as his partner crouched around our east doors and I watched stunned while Officer Bell explained that someone had called in a report of hostages held at gunpoint in a church in Pullman. He was inclined to believe that the report was a hoax – but nonetheless obliged to check out the story with every church in Pullman. He's the official hostage negotiator for Pullman, so he was also not looking forward to the prospect of engaging in Christmas Eve standoff. After he ran an identity check on me (!) they apologized for the inconvenience and drove off, with my prayers for a non-eventful search.

As of tonight's news, there's apparently no hostage situation going on in Pullman, but the episode brought home vividly to me the world in which the miracle of incarnation occurs. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, says the prophet Isaiah. In the midst of perhaps the worst pastoral assignment imaginable, on the island of Crete, the letter to Titus proclaims that the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all. In a world beset with stress and violence, where people might contemplate holding worshipers hostage in a church, where fear and sorrow and loss drive people to despair, in a world where the Christians of Iraq must tone down their celebrations for fear of violence and murder – in this very world of fear and doubt and darkness – the gift is given, the miracle comes once more.

As we crowd around the place where Jesus lay, where he laid out for his friends and for us all his body and blood, we come forward to see the place where God has leaned down to earth and earth has reached back up to God. Here is the the place where the miracle comes.

Welcome home. Welcome back from your college sojourn. Welcome back from your wanderings far from home. Welcome back from your journey into the world. Welcome each and every one of you to your true home, to the mystery of God made human. Merry Christmas.