

Christmas Eve mid night Service 2009
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Merry Christmas!

Here we are gathered once again in joy and awe, to celebrate the wonderful loving-kindness of God expressed to us definitively in the birth at Bethlehem. We have come to sing and pray as we recall once again the story of Mary and Joseph, of the angels and shepherds.

We gather around the crèche and think in awe of the reality expressed here, the reality that the source of all life, of all light, chose to come among us as one of us. - That the light and life of all that is came to us as a tiny baby.

It is a challenging exercise to try to stretch our minds around this idea, but every year we remind ourselves again of the truth, and of what it means in our lives.

The ways in which it becomes true for us vary with each individual. Today I will explore just one story of one person finding his lived reality changed by the reality celebrated here today. Some of you may have heard this story before, particularly because it is one of my favorites.

I once read about an Englishman named Matthew, who, like many of us, had heard the Gospel stories of Mary and Joseph and the Baby born in a stable, every year of his life. But one particular hearing changed his life forever. He sat listening as the deacon read and found himself suddenly outraged.

Why couldn't anyone find room for that poor couple?! Somebody must have had space. Any number of people could have **made** space! What was wrong with those people in Bethlehem any way?! Matthew sat there filled with righteous indignation, saying to himself, "Boy, if I had been there, things would have been different! I would have found them a place to stay, somewhere cleaner and nicer than a STABLE!!!"

But as he walked home, Matthew realized that his world was little different from the one he was condemning. He remembered an old man he had seen trying to sleep on the street that very evening. He knew that there were always people in need of shelter, and that he, for all his outrage, had never done a single thing about it. Matthew stopped in his tracks and made a solemn vow. He swore to God and to himself that he would never celebrate another Christmas with an empty room or an empty bed in his house, as long as he could find someone who needed shelter.

And so every year after that found Matthew out around the town looking and talking – and bringing people home with him. He gave each person a bed in his big old house and got everyone to work together to make Christmas. They cut wood and laid the fire, they decorated and cooked.

They all celebrated together for the whole twelve days of Christmas and even Epiphany. Once the celebrations had ended, Matthew would help some of his guests find jobs and helped others to reach their own distant homes. He loved Christmas and people loved him.

One unforgettable year, Matthew's house was full before Christmas Eve. His guests included a retired soldier traveling through town, an old gypsy whose family had abandoned her, a young peddler woman who had been left penniless by robbers, as well as several others of various conditions and ages. Every bed in every room was occupied and the motley group had become a sort of temporary family, each looking after the others.

The soldier cut an enormous amount of wood and they had a beautiful blaze in the fireplace. The gypsy had rallied a group to decorate all the rooms. The peddler was a wonderful cook. Matthew was delighted at how well everything was going and how joyful his house seemed. He kept saying that this would be the best Christmas ever.

But as they finished their Christmas Eve feast, the group heard a tentative knock on the front door.

Matthew found a very cold and very tired man at the door, saying that he had heard of Matthew's practice of taking people in who needed a place to stay. He had come to ask for a room. As Matthew started to explain that all his rooms were currently full, he noticed in the darkness behind the man a pale and very pregnant woman.

Suddenly Matthew saw himself behaving just like the innkeepers he held in such contempt, turning a needy couple and their unborn child out into the night.

Matthew immediately opened his door wide, and brought the couple over to the fire. His guests brought them blankets and food and cups of steaming cider. No one worried about finding a bed.

As Matthew watched his guests rally around the newcomers with effusive hospitality, he thought about where they could sleep. Obviously they needed privacy, and the only appropriate place available was Matthew's own room. So with a little help he got everything ready. They settled the couple into the room and the peddler woman assured everyone that she had delivered many babies. The husband said that he would call her as soon as she was needed, and the guests all headed off to sleep.

Matthew puzzled for a while about where to bed down himself. Notions of sleeping on the floor or in chairs he quickly abandoned as too strenuous for his old bones. Eventually, he climbed up to the attic and made himself a wonderfully cozy nest out of old clothes and bedding. He then settled down to watch the stars through the tiny attic window and was soon sound asleep.

Awakened by a sound in the middle of the night, Matthew came down to find all his guests gathered in his bedroom. Everyone stood looking at the mother holding her tiny new baby and at the father hovering over them with pride and pleasure.

No one was sure how long they had all stayed there, but one by one they went back to their various beds and sleep.

Nothing much was said about the birth or the midnight vigil, but everyone agreed that it was indeed the very best Christmas they had ever had and none of them ever forgot it.

I do not know whether Matthew ever lived. I learned of him from a story told by Alan Howard. Whether or not such a specific man existed, his story stands as a fine example of the continued coming of Jesus, of God-with-us into our midst and changing us into people worthy to be called Children of God. I pray that we may each have our own experiences of God opening our hearts and living among us, especially during this holy time of celebrating the birth at Bethlehem.

So wherever you are, and whoever you have around you, remember that Christ is always coming into our lives and into our hearts. We have only to open our eyes to welcome him in. Amen.