

Message for Dec. 24, 2011
Christmas Eve Service
Christmas Lutheran Church Bethlehem
By Pastor Fred Strickert

“Joseph also went. . . along with Mary, his wife. . . who was expecting a child.”

As we have come together for worship, late on a December afternoon, here in Bethlehem, we are warm here inside Christmas Lutheran Church, sheltered from the cold, the wind, the rain so common this time of year. Please, all come inside, find a seat, sit close together as you try to stay warm. Sit close together and try to imagine what it was like that day when Joseph and Mary arrived outside the small village of Bethlehem. When Joseph and Mary arrived without reservations, without a hotel confirmation number, but with a dire need for shelter. When Joseph and Mary arrived knowing only that God always provides, and that God provides best through generous, welcoming, and hospitable people.

Today on Christmas Eve, Dec, 24, 2011. five thousand miles to the east of Bethlehem in the cities of Cagayan de Oro and Illigan more than one thousand have died from the Philippines typhoon and 275,000 are homeless, all vulnerable and dependent on the good will of others.

Today on Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2011, several hundred miles to the north of Bethlehem, families are packing up their belongings and trying to get out of the way of escalating violence in war torn Syria.

Today on Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2011, two thousand miles away from Bethlehem to the south in the northeast province of Kenya, one thousand people arrived today in the Dadaab refugee camp, just as yesterday another one thousand arrived, and tomorrow another one thousand will arrive, all having traveled a week or two from their homes because of the famine from the extreme drought affecting the Horn of Africa. They have been coming well over a year since the United Nations asked the Lutheran World Federation to expand this older Dadaab Refugee camp, originally equipped for 40,000. They have come empty handed, only carrying with them their faith, their hope, their dream that something waits for them. Now 700,000 have found welcome with food, shelter, safety, no different from Joseph and Mary arriving in Bethlehem two thousand years ago—a refugee camp with few resources of their own but providing hospitality for the stranger, hope for those without reason to hope.

Among those arriving in Dadaab are mothers with small children as also expectant mothers soon to experience the birth pangs of childbirth—no different from Mary arriving in the small village of Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

This is the story of our modern world with half the world's population living in sprawling urban centers, millions of people moving from villages to cities seeking a better life. Emigrants seeking better economic conditions. 14 million people officially with refugee status. And some of you here tonight know firsthand what this means. 27 million internally displaced persons. Millions of other unofficially seeking refuge from flooded homes, earthquakes, and poor economic times. Millions of others trying to get out of the way of a humanity gone mad with war and conflict.

Perhaps I read the ancient gospel with eyes opened on this night to the plight of young refugee mothers, because on Christmas Eve some nine plus decades ago my own grandmother, single and pregnant, made her way from her ancestral village on the Rhine River to a German city in hope of a future in war-torn Europe among occupying soldiers. Perhaps, I listen this way to Luke's description of the first Christmas because I cannot forget the stories told me years ago by members of this Bethlehem congregation of Christmas 1948, when fleeing armies in Lydda and Ramle they eventually found their way to Bethlehem with only the clothes they could carry in a suitcase, leaving behind all the physical connections to the past, but prayers for a better future. We cannot, but think of the many people in transition at Christmas 2011 when we hear the words of the Christmas story.

But these are not merely nostalgic episodes of what might have been, but testimonies of faith and hope. People came to Bethlehem, because they knew that Bethlehemites would take them in. What else would one expect from a town named House of Bread? What else would one expect where Boaz welcomed the Moabites Ruth and Naomi to glean in the fields? What else would one expect when hospitality reigns chief among virtues? What else would one expect from people whose first words that roll off their lips are *Ahlan Wasahlan*? What else would we expect from a modern city reduced to a 4 square mile plot of land surrounded by 25 foot high walls and threatening military towers, where the welcome of soldiers is dependent upon the Western passport we carry, yet where many of us ourselves have experienced from today's Bethlehemites hospitality and a warm open-armed welcome.

And so Joseph also went up, along with Mary to whom he was engaged, and who was pregnant. They went up, surely with questions in their head, where will we stay? Where will we find food and drink? Where will our baby be born? They went with questions, but with full confidence that God is a God who provides. And God provides best when it takes place through humans, who are open, welcoming, hospitable. Yes, we have to strip away the myth-makers who in their culturally foreign retelling of the Christmas story envisioned this tiny village with its own 5-star Bethlehem Inn, with its gruff, individualistic, profit-motivated, self-centered, and stingy inn-keeper, none of which is an accurate translation of the Lucan text.

Here beneath the sanctuary of Christmas Lutheran Church are a number of caves, where people found refuge, warmth and security, over thousands of years of human upheaval. As people settled, they built houses over these caves where they kept their livestock, cattle, donkeys, sheep, and goats. It was likely in such a cave that Jesus was born. The Katalyma of Luke's gospel, the guest room, upstairs in the house was already crowded with travelers that first Christmas night. Still the householders were apparently very generous people, welcoming the strangers and showing hospitality. They would not think of turning away Joseph and his pregnant wife. That

was not the culture of Bethlehem. They would find a place for them, even if it was in the cave below the house.

- A cave where the young couple could find protection from the natural elements and security.
- A cave where they could be warm.
- A cave where their calls for help could be heard even in the crowded rooms upstairs.
- A cave where young Mary could find the privacy needed during her labor.
- A cave where the baby Jesus would find his first home—among the travelers, among the homeless, among strangers, emigrants, and refugees. Among the most vulnerable of people, people in need of a savior.

A Savior “. . . not regarding equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptying himself, taking the form of a servant.” Phil 2:6-7

“And so the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14) Among us in our world filled with refugees and immigrants.

The child of a refugee family finding hospitality and welcome in Bethlehem, just as the church today accepts the challenge of welcoming the stranger today. Fred Otieno, from the Church in Nairobi, recently said reflecting on his 16 hour a day, seven day a week position as camp coordinator at the Dadaab Refugee Camp, “God has a purpose for us being here to make a difference in the lives of these people, so we must try and help them enjoy their stay, because at the end of the day we all need one another.” And so the church throughout the world can take up the model of Bethlehem hospitality because at the end of the day we all need each other.

As we gather as community to hear this age-old story, we remember that

- Christmas is not about how much we can accumulate and hoard, but about how much we can give away, sharing with those in need.
- Christmas is not about walls that divide, security that intimates, and policies that humiliate, but about living in an attitude which sees the image of God in the other.
- Christmas is not even about safe, romantic, idyllic tales of long ago, but it is about Christ coming into our midst, now, in the present moment.
- Christmas is about welcoming Jesus into our midst, as we welcome the least among us, as we show hospitality to the stranger, for then we may discover that we have been entertaining angels unawares, or even God’s own son.