



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector
December 24, 2008

Christmas Eve 2008

A lot of years ago I wrote a story about Christmas and I would like to share it with you tonight.

It is called Joe's story:

It was 2 days before Christmas and in the middle of the shopping center sat a man who watched what was going on around him. He was a neatly dressed man with a brief case and he worked for a large corporation. He also carried another bag. His name was Joe and he sat and watched the people in the shopping center.

It was 2 days before Christmas and panic had obviously set in. The people had presents to buy. A tree had to be bought and trimmed. The refrigerator was beginning to be filled to capacity with lots of good food and all kinds of special holiday treats. It was not yet filled to capacity, but who was worrying because there was still one more shopping day till Christmas. The whole world was in a hustle and bustle for Christmas.

And Joe sat quietly and watched.

And Joe thought to himself about Christmas.

Christmas is a busy time of year.

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Established in 1847

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Christmas is worrying about what to get those you love in the way of presents.

Christmas is children and the delight of family on Christmas morning knowing that after all the worry Santa did come.

Christmas is a time to remember your family and friends. Those who are close and those who are distant. Those who have died and gone before us to be with God.

Christmas is a time when during the First World War fighting only happened when you could see the whites of your enemy's eyes. You knew that you were in your trench and the enemy was only 50 yard away in theirs and the battlefield was between you. Christmas is when in the first world war the British soldiers began to sing silent night. Slowly as the verses unfolded the song was being sung in English and German on both sides of the battlefield. The night of Christmas was filled with the sounds of Christmas carols and the hope of peace and not the sounds of guns and the violence of warfare.

And Joe paused as a couple of children ran past him with there parents and they were going to find a tree. Yes Christmas is a time of trees and lights and laughter.

As the man selling balloons passed Joe he wished him a merry Christmas. And Joe returned the

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greeting. Christmas is a smile. Christmas is a spirit A spirit of goodwill. A spirit of peace to all people.

Christmas is the gift of God to man of his son. God made man.

Christmas is a holy night when a young girl of about 15 or 16, a young girl who was not married, gave birth to a son.

Christmas is a holy night when that young girl's fiancé thought back to 6 months earlier when he thought how he should divorce her. You see to a Jew an engagement is a contract and the only way out of it is to get a certificate of divorce. After all he was not the father of the child so why should he take the responsibility. Yet he did take responsibility. He loved his fiancé and he was to love the child whom she gave birth to that night

Christmas is a holy night that saw this young couple after a long and arduous journey on a donkey arrive in Bethlehem along with half a million other people. The baby was due any minute and it was very difficult to find a place to stay. Cold. Homeless. Pregnant. Frightened. They trudged from house to house looking for help and place to stay. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. No help. No suggestions. No vacancies.

One owner who saw the plight of the young couple had a shed in his back yard where he kept his

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animals on these cold nights and that was all he could offer them. It wasn't much he said but it's all I've got. And it was sufficient. And on that night to a cold homeless, unmarried frightened couple a man showed compassion and offered what little he had, and the Christ the son of God, the savior of the world was born in his shed among his animals.

And Joe looked back to that Christmas of 2000 years ago. And he saw little difference in the Christmas of today. The story of the birth of Christ is a story that many people's names can be inserted instead of Mary and Joseph. Teenage pregnancies. The homeless, the lonely, the frightened, those who have nowhere to go. Those who do not want to help.

And Jesus of Nazareth who was born in a shed focused into his gospel, his good news, the spirit of Christmas. Jesus said anything you did for the least of my brother or sister, however humble you do it for me.

The spirit of Christmas is not what you do for yourself. It is what you do for others. The spirit of giving, the spirit of loving the spirit of caring, the spirit of being the innkeeper when you do not really know who or why you are helping somebody. But the fact that you did it was enough.

And Joe sat as the world of the shopping center was beginning to wind down. Time was drawing on

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towards the closing of the stores. Before the final lights were dimmed Joe got up picked up his briefcase and his other bag and left.

He left the shopping center where he had spent over an hour in silent contemplation of Christmas.

He had watched the world in frenzy in the shopping center and there was a tear in his eye.

As he left the warm shopping center into the bitterly cold night he walked 2 blocks and joined the line for a cup of soup a sandwich and bed for the night. His company that night was a variable bunch of people. A couple of business men, construction workers, salesmen, unemployed, 2 families with small children. As the lights were putt off Joe laid down and thanked god for Christmas. He thanked God that the spirit of Christmas had touched somebody to allow him a roof over his head, a place to shave and shower and do his laundry until he got things straightened out. He prayed for all those who had been innkeepers in his life, who offered him a little of what they had.

To be homeless is to be at the bottom. It is not only those who choose to live on the streets that are homeless. it is ordinary people doing ordinary jobs trying to get on with an ordinary life.

And Joe slept well that night. The story of Christmas filled him with hope. It was not the story of a rosy nativity that encouraged him, it was the real story of Christmas. The story of human lives, the story of goodwill, of trust and love. Of a small baby who grew to teach us about care, compassion

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and true spirit.

And Joe discovered Christmas. He knew that where he was in his life God had been there before. And whatever happened God would still be with him.

And Joe knew the next night, the night of Christmas he would not have a mansion prepared for Christ, but he would have a heart that was humble. A heart that was prepared.

And Joe knew that the glitter of the shopping centers will change after Thursday to after Christmas sales.

But the spirit of Christmas will live for ever. And one day it will be Joe who will be standing at the door of shelter saying yes we have room. Welcome stranger. For who is stranger but a friend that we have not yet met?

May the spirit of Christmas, the spirit of the Christ child, the spirit of the holy family touch your hearts and lives this Christmas and forever.

Amen.

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