

Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2017 [10:30]

Grace, Lexington  
Fr. James

## **NIGHT OF WONDER**

The calendar new year begins on January 1<sup>st</sup>. The new year of the seasons begins with the birth of Spring, the freshening of rain and the spreading of flowers. The new year of our activities and programs comes when the children begin school in August. The liturgical year of the Church begins with Advent, four Sundays before Christmas Day. But the new year of the Soul begins tonight, for it is Christmas. The flurry of preparation is over, hopefully so is the weariness of great expectations and small checking accounts. The games, the bicycles and the mite of jewelry are purchased, wrapped and under the tree. The cookies are made, the cards are sent or not. The last newspaper has been read to feed our terrors, and the last minute recommendations about what to do with our money before the new tax law kicks in have been perused, if not understood. And all of that is behind us for it is Christmas Eve, and we are here, and the great New Year of the soul has begun. The time of wonder, the time of joy, the time

of adoration when we are pulled beyond ourselves to another horizon. In the words of Conrad (The Conditions of Art) it is as if an artist had spoken “to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives: to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity of dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear which binds men [and women] to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.”

And what is it which evokes this coming to the brink of wonder, which promises the re-birth of joy? Well its just a birthday—a child's birthday,—for that's what Christmas is—a child's birthday. [Story of Sam and Loren]

It is a beautiful story, that of the birth of the Christ child. But after all it was a very commonplace event. The governor of Syria, Quirinius by name, had ordered an enrollment. Evidently

throughout the Roman Empire this was taking place. A thorough census was needed for the levying of taxes. The carpenter Joseph took his young and pregnant wife the 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. A commonplace experience as we look back. For them it was *far* from commonplace. They were young, it was their first child; the enrollment was forced and feelings against it were running high. There was rebellion in the hills of Galilee and the Romans were out in force quelling it. Now lest you think this was not something for them to be concerned about, let me hasten to add that Galilee was a small land, smaller than Rhode Island, smaller than the county of Los Angeles. Armed rebellion was a danger to all and they traveled in a caravan for protection.

Bethlehem wasn't a tourist town, not then. The merchants and bankers had not been preparing for this as if it were the Olympics coming to town in three years. They were not ready for this onslaught. Perhaps the history of taxation was as confusing then as it seems to be now, pushed through in a hurry in a flurry of unknowns. There were not enough rooms for the crowds at any

price. It is not that no one cared that the young woman was going to have a baby. Women with child were respected then as now. I rather think that they were shown to the stable out of respect. Not everyone who came and could not get in to the inn was offered the shelter of the dry warm cave in the field behind the hostelry. The inn-keeper probably looked for the coming of the Messiah like the rest of his countrymen. He was not unlike us.

The baby was born. It was probably a hard night for the woman and the man. We are not told of a midwife, just the two of them in a strange place, with only a saddlebag of provisions and lengths of cloth for wrapping the child they knew would come before they returned home. It was a common enough event—another baby born—another family begun in the ceaseless round of birth and new life which is our common lot, our common hope.

But of course it was not just another mark to be put on the census taker's tally sheet. This was a first child for Mary and Joseph. And everyone who has ever held a new born, had it curl its tiny hand around your outstretched finger, felt the silky

smoothness of its cheek against your rougher, more accustomed skin know without question the sense of wonder and joy which coursed through one young mother and father that night in Bethlehem. It was no ordinary night for *them*. That birth was no commonplace unremarkable event for them.

Nor was it for a small bunch of shepherders outside the town. My God, the whole sky lit with starlight, angels, swamped with music and fearful, joyful words. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; This birth fulfilled the hopes and expectations of an entire nation could they have but known it. But those shepherds, they knew it. Living a lonely unrecognized existence, on this night they must have felt as if they were at the center of universe and that all else whirled around them. I wonder if they felt somewhat like Meg in Madeline L'Engles book, *A Wind in the Door*. Meg had been with the cherubim in time and space and was at this moment witnessing the birth of a star. She looked about. “Ahead of her was a tremendous rhythmic swirl of wind and flame, but it

was wind and flame quite different from the cherubim's; this was a dance, a dance ordered and graceful, and yet giving an impression of complete and utter freedom, of ineffable joy. As the dance progressed, the movement accelerated, and the pattern became clearer, closer, wind and fire moving together, and there was joy, and song, melody soaring, gathering together as wind and fire united.

And then wind, flame, dance, song, cohered in a great swirling, leaping, dancing, single sphere.

“...will the star be named?” asked Meg. “He calls them all by name,’ the cherubim said.”

And so with this child, named by God before his birth, Jesus. “The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all people.”

“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

A time of wonder and joy—no less for us, than for them. “Joy” wrote L'Engle, “the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

“joy” wrote Bernanos [48: 15,16] is in the gift of the Church, whatever joy is possible for this sad world to share.”

Christmas is a parable for experiencing wonder in the commonplace. A green tree in winter. The hint of a storm and the promise of snow. A thoughtfulness. Mike Galligan put it this way in his poem:

The breeze and the falling snow  
were one and the tear was a song  
of joy flowing in cold night air  
to echo all the meadow long. [personally made available]

Christmas—a parable for experiencing wonder and joy in the commonplace. Joy, the infallible sign of the presence of God. Is it a coincidence that the Greek root for the words 'joy' and 'grace' is the same? I wonder what would happen in Lexington if the whole town became aware that at 123 W. Washington Street 'joy' was synonymous with Grace?

It is Christmas, the new year of the soul. It is the time for wonder, and joy and adoration. Heschel has said, “When mind and

soul agree, belief is born. But first our hearts must know the shudder of adoration.” [Man is not alone, p. 74] This weekend I have been humming the words of the carol Venite Adoremus. Venite adoremus Dominum—come, let us adore the Lord. It is Christmas! *So be it.*