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St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
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Christmas Day, Year "C": Isaiah 9:3-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Title: Other Realities

You know, this story that we read on Christmas Day, is a very interesting one. It is, of course, interesting for the obvious reason that it is a Gospel text associated with one of the most meaningful days in our lives together -- the Day on which we celebrate the birth of Christ -- God With Us -- Emmanuel. THE event in which God, Godself, came to be and to live among us, as one of us, to experience all that we experience, and ultimately, whose life will have ultimate meaning, not only for us, but for the whole world.

But it is also interesting from a structural point of view. One moment we are hearing about an event in the lives of ordinary Jews, in relatively ordinary times, and the next minute we are encountering the very UNOrdinary.

In the first part of the story, we see that Mary and Joseph, along with hundreds, probably thousands, moving about the country side -- for the Emperor has issued a decree to the effect that the whole world was to be registered. And so those who have moved away from their ancestral birthplace must now return to be registered. We can only imagine how distressing these events must have been for those affected, but the state had spoken. And the state was powerful and had the wherewithal to exercise its power, and to impose consequences for ignoring that power.

And so people, including one Joseph of Nazareth and his wife Mary, along with many others were doing what was required. And except for the fact that Joseph and Mary are being forced by government decree to make this journey, we find normal people going about the relatively normal business of a relatively normal day.

But then the story takes a very different shift doesn't it? One minute we are in a nice little narrative about two people going about their business. But then there is an abrupt shift in the tone and texture of the story. Suddenly, we hear that also "in that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night."

Okay. Nothing extraordinary about that.

But then we hear that an angel stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. And the angel spoke to them and said, "Do not be afraid. And the angel

says, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Messiah, the Lord." And the angel tells of signs that will identify this child so that he might be known. And then suddenly appears a MULTITUDE of heavenly hosts singing, "Glory to God in the highest – a song, by the way we sing almost every week in this place as we gather in our worship of God.

Glory to God in the Highest, and Peace to his people on earth.....

The angel and the rest of the heavenly host make this announcement, sing this glorious hymn.....and then..... they're gone.

"Wow! How amazing," we might imagine these shepherds saying to one another.

One minute our shepherds are going about their daily routine of caring for their flock, and then they experience a marvelous, wonderful, amazing heavenly visitation. Not the stuff of the natural world of which we are accustomed, is it? THIS part of the story doesn't sound like the same kind of reality as that which comes before it. This does not seem to be the stuff of "real life" like trying to earn a living, or not being able to find a room for the night as you are traveling.

There are in this story two very different kinds of reality. Or is it?

The appearance of angels is one of the ways the Bible has of reminding us that there are other realities beyond paying the bills, running the errands, cleaning the gutters, buying the Christmas presents. The appearance of angels in the Bible is always, in one way or another, God saying to us, "There is more to this thing that we call life than meets the eye. There is a reality beyond the routineness of life."

It is at least in part in response to an awareness of, and a seeking of the very important truth that rest in that other reality that keeps us coming back here week after week. For it is here that we find a context within which to hear the very voice of God saying, "I love you."

Did you know that Christmas day has one of the lowest crime rates in America? Apparently, even the most hard-hearted, the most mean-spirited tend to hear something of the "I love you" on Christmas Day. And it's so hard to be ugly, to act out when hearing those words.

And there are numerous documented cases where even the hostilities of war have been temporarily suspended on Christmas day – sometimes by mutual consent; sometimes quite spontaneously. There are even cases of combatants exchanging food and

handshakes and other pleasantries. Only, of course, to soon return to the act of doing their best to kill one another.

But for a moment, in such instances it seems that there can be an envelope of sorts, a moment in time wherein is the opportunity to enter into agreement around the Holy Voice that speaks of the primacy of Holy Love – and such a moment can even find its way into the most of horrific of circumstances and the most violent of human enterprises. And it is so hard to render violence for violence in the face of love.

And so we gather here this night in this place where we so often do and as people will gather all over the world this day to sing songs about God's coming into the world as a small, vulnerable baby, and to hear stories of angelic visitations, and to eat bread and to drink wine which Jesus instructed us to do *for the remembrance of Him*. In other words, to be reminded that we, you and I, and the whole world are loved by the Author of Love.

In these stories of our Lord and in the Eucharist is a reality very much beyond our normal 'everyday', yet it is in these very experiences that God invites us into which God intends to be critical, even central to our lives.

Mary has experienced much in the last few months. She has experienced much that we might call 'ordinary.' She has taken a trip to visit her cousin. She has probably had to deal with morning sickness. She has probably asked Joseph to build a crib in his workshop. Yet, at the same time she has experienced much that was beyond her ordinary experience. And yet the ordinary and peculiar; the routine and even the mysterious have been interwoven in her life.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Dear ones, May treasured all these words and pondered them, and pondered their meaning in her heart. We can and certainly should do likewise. May the treasuring and the pondering of these words be a part of our everyday, as well as that which seem to be marvelously and wonderfully beyond our everyday.

May this be true this day and all the days of our lives.

Amen.