



SOMETHING MUST HAVE HAPPENED HERE

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2007 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; and Luke 2:1-14 (15-20).

In the 1540's, during the great age of discovery, the explorer Coronado discovered a gorge etched into our landscape by the mighty Colorado River. It is more than a mile deep in places leaving incredible rock formations along its sides, fantastic shapes, multicolored peaks, and a variety of canyons, ravines, and layers of rock. For more than a hundred million years, gravel and mud carried by the rapids have cut deeper and deeper into the earth. It is called the Grand Canyon, and once seen it is never forgotten. One day, a man with a small child stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon peering over the side in speechless wonder at its beauty and magnificence. After a long silence, the child looked up and said to his father, "Wow! Something must have happened here." Something must have happened here.

If you were to visit the earth this week from another planet in the galaxy, you would have to say, "Something must have happened here." There is no time during the year when there are more lights brightening our world than this time. There is no time during the year when more joyous music fills the air than this time. There is no time during the year when there is a greater spirit of good will and compassion than this time. Any outside observer who chose to visit at this time would know something must have happened here.

If they were to examine the cultural evidence, they might be hard put to make sense of it - the crowded shopping malls and frantic activity, the office parties, the holiday balls, the costumes, the bands of people braving the cold to sing at doors and windows. They would have to wonder why we bring dead trees into our homes. If they were to ask the person in the street what it was all about, I'm not sure what sort of an answer they would get. Some would point to the importance of family, and the great gatherings around the glistening tables set with china and crystal. Some people might point to the jolly old elf, older than anyone can remember, with the white beard and the bag on his back.

A woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before.

Her arms were full of bulky packages when the elevator door opened. It was full. The

occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load.

As the doors closed she blurted out, “Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!”

Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator came a single voice that said, “Don’t worry. They already crucified him.”

Something happened here. That something may not be obvious to the most careful of observers, but our imagined visitors from another galaxy would surely know that something had happened here. And so it has. The origins will not be found in strings of lights, of course, or in the music which assaults us in shopping centers. To understand the meaning of Christmas, one must go back in time to an insignificant little town, in an obscure part of the world, where an infant of no social significance whatsoever was born to inexperienced peasant parents in a makeshift shelter for animals, because there was no room in the inn, and was placed in a small, snug feeding trough to sleep.

The inn would not have been like the hotels we know. It would have been a rectangular building with open porches arranged around the outside for the use of travelers. In the center of the structure was an enclosure for the animals accompanying them. Given the overcrowded conditions in Bethlehem, the inn would not have provided sufficient privacy for childbirth even had there been room, so the stable is not a bad substitute, all things considered. And the manger was actually perfect. As experienced parents know, newborn babies are accustomed to cramped quarters, and feel much more secure when tightly wrapped. The manger would have been a snug space, and would have protected the baby from drafts and falls.

So far, this infant could have been any infant, and this little family any peasant family. Only then we come to the message of the angels. Once the angels appear, nothing will ever be the same again. The shepherds, we’re told, are keeping watch over their flock by night, which means it was lambing season, the only time they would have been out at night. The night is much darker than the nights we know. There was no electricity, and so, of course, no ambient light, no street lights, no lighted homes, no beams from the headlights of automobiles, and no light to reflect off of low lying clouds. The night was black as pitch. But this night was unlike any other. The sky was suddenly a blaze of light. More light than they had ever seen before. The shepherds rose in terror as the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and in the midst of that blinding light they hear the sound of angels, the rush of wings, and then the message, “Be not afraid.” Be not afraid.

It is hard to imagine this as a gathering of the faithful. The angels did not simply report on a new event in salvation history. The angels did not read to them the Ten Commandments. No one submitted a statement on the doctrine of the incarnation. There were no learned expositions of the Trinity, and no resolutions were proposed for the development of apostolic succession. There wasn’t even any budget presented for their

consideration. In fact, nothing about it resembled any church gathering you and I have ever attended.

The angel simply said to them, “Be not afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was a heavenly host, praising God, and filling the skies with song and with the radiance of their light. In the intensity of that moment the shepherds are given a glimpse of heaven. In the presence of the Divine, angels and mortals converse together, sing together, and celebrate together, praising God.

And how did those shepherds respond to this news? When the angels left the sky, the shepherds went to investigate, to see for themselves whether they had imagined it all. They took themselves down from the black hillsides into the darkened town of Bethlehem. In the pitch black of that dark night, they sought out the inn and the stable, and there they found Mary, and Joseph, and a baby, lying in a manger, just as the angels had said. In the birth of that tiny baby, they recognized the seeds of the future. They experienced the rebirth of hope, and they returned home in great joy.

On this night, God took an incredible risk. Mary might have said to the angel Gabriel, “No thank you. Please find someone else.” Joseph might have decided to put her away quietly after all. The donkey could have gone lame on the road to Bethlehem. They could have been delayed by road construction, or set upon by thieves, and they could have given birth somewhere else. The child could have been stillborn. The shepherds could have said, “It must be a dream,” and gone back to sleep on that dark hillside. The magi could have missed the star and remained safe at home in Persia, or taken a wrong turn and wound up in Rome. So many things could have happened differently. The story itself could have been lost centuries ago. We might never have known about the God who loved us so deeply that he sent his only son to live and die as one of us that we might be saved. We might have grown up believing that we have no visible means of support...but we didn't and none of those things occurred.

Something happened here, and because it did we hear the voices of the angels. Be not afraid. To us is born this night in the city of David a Savior. In the birth of a tiny infant, God enters human history. That is what happened here.

We are here this night because we are the people who know what happened here. We are here to catch a glimpse of heaven, to see in the lights of Christmas candles the radiant sky of Bethlehem, to hear once more the song of the angels, and to add our voices to the chorus that sings through eternity. “Hark! the herald angels sing glory to the newborn king!”