



“Provocative propositions” – that’s how one commentator responded to our readings tonight.<sup>1</sup> He says a provocative proposition is one that adds interest to our analysis – it is something that causes us to think and reflect – to move deeper than a plain and simple reading of the text. To ponder, as Mary did, the Word of God in our heart and as we live our lives. The readings tonight give us lots to chew on.

Are they factually true- maybe yes and maybe no. Even if not 100% factually true, do they speak to our soul’s deepest longings? Do they, as Bruce Epperly asks, “add to the zest of life or lead to personal transformation? There is a deeper truth from the Christmas stories that can never be captured by scholarship alone.”

Yes, these stories we hear each year are familiar. But they are not stale – they are not stripped of their connection to us for hearing them each year. They are spiritually true whatever else you may say about them. These stories are foundational to what we believe as Christians, whether they are 100% factually true or not. They speak to our longing and our need to belong and to believe in something greater than ourselves but still connected to our own lives.

Many Christians believe that the prophet Isaiah was foretelling the birth of Christ. Many of us can hear the soaring music of Handel’s *Messiah* in the words: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Jesus is all of these things and more.

You may recall a political bumper sticker a few years back: “Got hope?” it asked- promising that if you voted for that particular candidate, your hopes would be fulfilled – or at least more of your hopes come true than if you voted for the opponent. Regardless of who you voted for, hope is an enduring part of our lives.

We hope for better weather. We hope for a better job or better income. We hope for good health.

We hope for world peace. The list of what we hope for goes on and on.

In working with those whose lives are mired in generational poverty, one of the things you notice is that often there is no hope. There is no sense that “if only” or “when” – rather, life is a day-to-day and sometimes hour-to-hour putting one foot in front of the other drudgery. This is one

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<sup>1</sup> <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/years/2013-12-24/christmas-evechristmas-day>  
(12/23/13)

reason it can be so hard to move people out of poverty. Some do, of course, but many who have no hope – and indeed have never had hope – do not see anything ever changing.

The loss of hope is one of the saddest ways of being because your world closes down and becomes narrower and narrower.

The birth of Jesus on this night – and what he symbolizes – is all about hope. It is about the hope that we are not alone. God has not created the world just to walk away and leave us to our own devices. God is with us – notice the present tense of the verb: is. Now. Always. Every minute and every situation.

Jesus is the promise that even in dire circumstances – even when your cradle is really a rough wooden feed trough for animals – hope exists for a better life and a better world.

Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem because Joseph was of the House of David and all had been ordered to report to their home town to be registered. Travel was by foot and donkey – not easy. Likely dusty and maybe even cold and windy. Slow and perhaps even tortuous at that time of year. Our weather today is pretty cold so imagine traveling on foot. But they did.

And when they arrive, there is no family to greet them. There is no room at the inn, even – only space in a stable. For those of you that have been with us at services at the Barn, you have a sense of what it must have been like for Joseph and Mary – yes, out of the wind or the worst of it, but still cold and probably mostly dark – and filled with the cows, sheep, goats, horses or whatever other animals belonged to the inn keeper. Undoubtedly not as sweetly smelling as the hotel room you and I are used to when we travel!

Where was Joseph's family? Where was Joseph's mother and father or brothers and sisters or cousins? Why weren't they in that stable rejoicing with Joseph and Mary and helping to care for the baby? Why didn't anyone else at the inn, seeing Mary and how she was great with child, say "take my place"? Where was common hospitality for those who had traveled far and were in such straights?

God uses mysteries such as this to shine forth. To show us that God is with the least among us. Maybe not in all the ways they might wish but perhaps God deliberately leaves room for us to do our part through our outreach efforts to those in our communities who are in need.

God uses situations such as the birth of Jesus to offer transformation of life to us. God begs us to see, in this story, our story. To see where we might do better. To see situations where we might say: "take my place" or where we might brave the elements to be present with family that celebrates a milestone. To be present, perhaps, with someone who is lonely or is grieving. To be fully present is one of the greatest gifts you can give another.

God uses Joseph and Mary to give us an example of love. Love for each other and love of this child, born this night. In the birth of this child, whose coming and whose importance was foretold by the prophets and the angels, we see the value of doing our best for each other even when our best is perhaps not very much by the world's standards. We see the awe of hope and love found in the person of a newborn child. A child whose mission in life will be to bring us to the light of love of God and love of neighbor.

Frank Logue, Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Georgia, offers us this to chew on:

Mary and Joseph were strangers, and no one invited them in. And those who shut their doors to Joseph as he looked for room for his great-with-child wife were shutting their doors on God incarnate. When they did not make room for that one pregnant girl, they did not make room for the maker of heaven and earth to be born among us. Yet, the story of Christmas is a story of good news of great joy for all people, not just those surrounded by family tonight, and not just those who will celebrate by exchanging expensive gifts.

Christmas is exceedingly joyful good news because in coming to a couple who were themselves lost and left out, God turned the world upside down. ...The idea of God becoming human in lowly circumstances is wondrous, for it means that God knows you and loves you even as you are, whether you spend tonight alone or trying to sleep on a fold-out couch in a house full of extended family. The miracle of Immanuel, "God with us," is that we see that though Mary and Joseph may have been forsaken by others, they were never forgotten by God. ...

And we who gather tonight in the warm glow of the light of God's love should be challenged by this vision of a world turn right-side-up by a baby in a manger. For having seen that he who the universe could not contain may be found in a stable, and in the bread and wine of communion, how much better our eyes are to be focused on seeing our Lord in the people in need all around us. And it is this vision of the world that is indeed good news of great joy for all people.<sup>2</sup>

The birth that we celebrate tonight is the one we have been waiting for during Advent – our time of preparation and reflection. It is now time to move forward, hand-in-hand with this newborn child, to do our part to make the realm of God a reality. Will it be fully realized in our lifetime-probably not. That does not excuse us from doing our part as best as we are able. Provocative propositions, indeed.

Much to ponder as we become willing participants in God's plans for all of creation. Never sell yourself short, even when you find yourselves in a lowly stable on a dark and cold night. God has come to earth to be with you and me. God has come, in the form of baby Jesus, so that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2013/?cat=8> (December 23, 2013)

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2013

Isaiah 9:2-7; Ps. 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

*O come, o come, Emmanuel. The Son of God has come to earth this night. Rejoice.*