

"Who Comes to the Cradle?"
Christmas Eve
24 December 2023
Trinity+St.Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

INI

This is such a recurring custom for us – Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The tree, the greens, the lights, the food, the parties, and, oh yes, the manger. There is something about going to the manger, a little pilgrimage that is common to us all. While we are there at the manger, it might do us well to notice who is there with us. Who has made the journey? What others approach on bended knee? Who else is struck by the simple wonder of the night?

"And there were shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night." These shepherds have been so cleaned up, so knowable in the story that has been repeated over the ages that we forget their significance and meaning. Shepherds lived at the edge of society. Unable to observe the religious rites and rituals, they were somewhat shunned and despised by the rest of society. Yet they were called to be there – at the manger. The invitation came, according to Saint Luke, from the heavenly host – a choir of angels. The shepherds, the erstwhile dregs of society, are bidden to come, and be aware of the momentous scene. They look, see, and understand. They understand God's call to them and God's acceptance of them. They are the evidence of God's intent in the birth of this Holy Child.

If we reach further into the story. If we extend our gaze to the Epiphany on 6 January, we will see more who have been invited. Matthew, in his story, sees strangers from a foreign land who see in a star the same divine invitation that the shepherds experienced. These immigrants, if you will, searching for God and the promise implicit in the star – these foreigners join us at the Virgin and Child, and are accepted and greeted there. It was not an easy trip. The powers that be discouraged them and used them for an ill purpose. Yet the angels guided them to a safe journey. The wise ones praise the Son.

We cannot forget the others, Mary and Joseph, also in a strange land far from home. It is out of the usual that they are brought to the extraordinary – to Bethlehem, and to the birth of the Child. Mary ponders and Joseph guards standing next to the other outcasts, and later next to the newly arrived foreigners. Do we deign to stand next to them as well? Will we be proper company with them? Will the divine greet us and welcome us as it has the others? As we wonder and ponder with Mary, our thoughts need in thanksgiving to turn elsewhere.

It seems that we have forgotten something. In the manger is the Holy Child. He will be despised like the others who have come to greet him, and he will be an

outcast in his own time. However, now we are with him, God made flesh, our flesh, our existence. That God should want to be flesh of our flesh, sister and brother to us, this should have great meaning for us. As Saint John tells us in his Gospel, Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Word that God intends for us to both hear and understand. It should have great meaning for those we live with and love. It should also have great meaning for those we hate and misunderstand. God is in the midst of us, in the flesh, and in the foibles of daily life. In the Child we see God with us.

God has invited us here. Some of you are here understanding that invitation. Others have come on occasion to remember and renew, and for some this is a new experience and a new story. For *all* of us the story is really about God's desire of and love for us. If we forget that sometimes, then we need to go back to the story – this story of shepherds, strangers, wise ones, an unmarried mother, a forgiving fiancé, and the Holy Child in their midst. Looking at and pondering all those who have gathered will help us to understand this day's purpose, and the rituals that we are about to perform. It is so easy, really, *God so loved the world*. Not just a specific part of it, not just a chosen people, but all of it, all people.

A blessed Christmas to you.

SDG