

Yr. C, Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
849 Words

Lessons: **Isaiah 9:2-7**
****Psalm 96****
****Titus 2:11-14****
****Luke 2:1-14****

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is all about visitation. In a nutshell, the Gospel is about how God has visited—literally, physically—in the body and soul of Jesus, “born this day in the City of David...a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

God could have chosen any method of revelation to show Divine life and love. Among all the options, God chose the most humble way imaginable—a child, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger...born to an unmarried woman far from home...for whom there was no room, no place where she belonged.

The Gospel is all about visitation. Remember how the angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her not to fear. Remember how the angel visited Joseph and told him not to fear.

The truth is that there was a lot to be afraid of. The almighty Roman Emperor was putting the Jews in their place—literally. With a stroke of his pen, Augustus put Mary and Joseph on the crowded road to Bethlehem at the worst, possible time in their lives. Ironically, it was an oppressive government that caused the Prince of Peace to “appear this day in the City of David.” Indeed, a child has been born for us. The Son of God has visited us.

When the time came for Mary to deliver her child, there were shepherds in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flock when suddenly—you guessed it—they were *visited* by an angel. The Gospel is all about visitation.

According to St. Luke, the glory of God did *not* shine around that angel. Rather, the glory of God shone around *those shepherds*. Suddenly, they saw *themselves* in a new light, and they were terrified. As with Mary and Joseph, the angel encouraged them with the same, simple, profound, and challenging words: “Do not fear!” At the worst, possible time of night the shepherds were summoned to get up and go *visit* the Messiah. The Gospel is all about visitation.

Many years ago, Kim and I received a gift of pewter place card holders which also could function as napkin rings. We’re not really that formal, nor do we host large dinner parties where place cards help guests find their seats. So, we put that gift away in a closet and forgot about it.

When we moved to Greenville the box re-appeared in the piles of boxes that must be sorted after a move. Upon opening the box, Kim recalled the gift and the special person who gave it. She also had a moment of inspiration with a new and different idea. Instead of place cards with the names of banquet guests, Kim inserted small photographs of the five members of our family to help distinguish our napkins from one another night after night.

Some of the pictures were sweet. Some were funny. Sometimes the pictures got updated. I first appeared in a tweed sports coat at the Lincoln Memorial. Now, I am pictured putting on a bicycle helmet. As our family gathered around the table each night, we could see our place—*literally* we could picture ourselves at that table...we could plainly see where we belonged.

The set included more than five rings. And so, in recent years Kim began a new tradition. Whenever we would have a house guest or a dinner guest, Kim would go on social media and find a picture. It might be a boyfriend,

pictured as a little boy with a bowl cut. It might be a relative with a sweet smile from ages past or a friend who was just photographed days before arriving.

Here's what I have noticed. People are blessed when they can see—clearly—that they are invited. We are blessed when we can see—plainly—that we are included. We are blessed when we can picture ourselves—literally, physically—belonging around the table.

The Good News of Christmas Eve is that God has visited us. In the most humble way imaginable, God has clearly shown how God belongs with us. In the most glorious way imaginable, God has plainly shown how we belong to God.

The gift of Christmas is that we can see—clearly—that we are invited. We are blessed—like the shepherds—to see ourselves in a new light. The glory of the Lord has shone around us so that we can see—plainly—that we are included. We can picture ourselves belonging around the Lord's Table. The Gospel is *still* all about visitation.

Whatever else you take away from this familiar Gospel story, I hope you will remember this: the simple and profound message of Christmas is that we belong. By his visitation, Christ belongs to us, and—therefore—we belong to God, now and forever. The Good News is that God wants us to picture ourselves—to see ourselves—belonging around Christ's Table.

On this holy night, we are invited—like the shepherds—to visit our Savior who has come into the world to visit us.

So, come, all ye faithful. Come! Let us adore him!

Amen.