

Sermon for Christmas Eve 2021 @ 5:30 p.m. @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Scriptures: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96(UM815); Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2 :1-20
« **Fresh** »

There was a prayer vigil last Wednesday for the female police officer who was shot down @ Curtis Bay Park. It was cold, and I thought as the small crowd gathered and shivered, how desolate much of Christmas is ... and for that matter, how grim and dilapidated cities are, and much of the world we say God loves appears.

It's awesome that, so soon after the movement we call the church started, it found these stunning writers to produce, and then to get accepted, scenes and songs and a story line we can build on. Jesus had to get born ... but we have the blessed Luke to describe it, making it, among such low-rank people as we believe most of the first believers were, so fresh and song-worthy. Fresh.

That's the word that came to me in preparing for this year's Christmas Eve. For all its complications and troubles, a birth retains for most of us a freshness that is unforgettable.

Bethesda is unlike St. John's Church down @ St. Paul and 27th Streets on the block where I've lived for more than half a century. Ever since I've known it (I was pastor there for the first few months of my retirement, in 2000), St. John's has been a congregation with at least a few people eager to have a say in the liturgy. They couldn't stand my insistence on using the lectionary, for instance. Bethesda's shown no interest in taking charge of worship planning in my time among you ... so when I found this little drama about the inn and the insiders and outsiders, I've had it year after year as our theme for Christmas Eve. "Fresh" fits well into it this year: Everything's so uncertain, and scary. It even seems like a terrible time to have a baby ... but as we know, that often has little to do with whether a baby arrives. The little drama puts that out in front, along with our reactions, both insiders and outsiders.

What I hope we can hear and receive this blessed eve is the profound rightness of this quality about being human, and about claiming Lordship for one of the least significant among humans in that time and place. If we, as we say, are members, actual arms and legs and hearts and minds, of the Messiah... if God is that connected to us ... we say we are created in God's image, and later on we call ourselves members of Christ's risen body ... then every birth, and every rebirth, every new moment of our lives, surely bears the freshness of a newborn person.

The little drama has us accepting this in a welcoming way, after some resistance. It provides scriptural reference for reflecting on this. We go

from this service reminded, reflecting, on the welcome we are both giving and receiving as God's extended family. "Fresh as a daisy;" "newborn."

May God shed God's spirit upon each one of us. May all aspects of our experience turn fresh this night. May this begin a new life ... for we know, we believe, we find out again and again ... how true that is. We are growing up. We are improving, as we allow God to work even in our dark times. As St. John of the Cross says, "Because of his love for us, God urges us to grow up..." "No soul will ever grow deep in the spiritual life unless God works passively in that soul by means of the dark night"...."Through the darkness pride becomes humility, greed becomes simplicity, wrath becomes contentment, luxury becomes peace, gluttony becomes moderation, envy becomes joy, and sloth becomes strength."

Let us pray. O God, in these days when everybody, including the innkeepers and property-owners see so much bad and wrong all around, turn our hearts inside out, and allow and enable us to turn our own darkness into patience, and make us useful in the new life you are bringing about in all these troubles, in this holy story, on this holy night, and onward until we grow up and see thee face to face, through Jesus, our friend and companion. Amen.