

Christmas Eve, 2021
Homily - Rev Judy Steers

What is a season of peace and goodwill when you feel anything less than peaceful, and your good will went out the window with the latest round of restrictions, infection rates, cancelled plans, family tensions over ‘do we gather or not?’ and everything, yet again, being not what we expected or hoped for?

A story:

Joseph threw a load of wood into the bin in the corner with uncharacteristic force, fuelled by frustration. It was bad enough that there had been rumours of a coming tax census, which would mean an unplanned journey. He was fed up with living under the oppression of an occupying force – restrictions, limitation and everyone just getting by as best they could. And now – the taxation census was announced and they would have to leave immediately for Bethlehem. The timing could not be worse; Mary was due within weeks.

Joseph didn't envy Mary the challenge of such a long trip when heavily pregnant. The joy of this pregnancy and the sense of mystery and wonder that accompanied the waiting had all paled in this difficult trip, that he did not choose and would NOT have undertaken if he had not been obliged to. The travel was slow. They couldn't make the time that they had hoped to and rest stops were frequent.

So it was no surprise really when they arrived after many days on the road to find no rooms, no beds. One kind family made the best space they could in the lower part of their house where the animals were kept. Mary and Joseph just looked at each other and sighed – this was the best that they were going to get. Still, it was private, and warm with the heat from the animals and it was a shelter. But the look she gave him – he knew she was just DONE with all this.

The baby was born a couple of days later and afterwards there were just a few moments of perfect peace in the middle of the night, when he just stopped and sighed. One perfect moment of stillness and silence as Mary rested and the baby slept. They caught each other's eyes. He could tell that Mary was taking it all in and just sitting with it. It was like all of their hopes

and fears were met in this one moment in time. For a second, he could catch a glimpse of it and that restored him. It was bigger than just this moment.

It wouldn't last, though they didn't know it at the time. Soon after, visitors brought word (or did he dream it?) that their lives were suddenly in terrible danger and they had to get away. That just about did Joseph in with despair. After all this, and now they couldn't even go home, in fact, they faced a journey four times longer than they had just travelled, into a neighbouring country, to get away from the danger to their newborn from a despotic ruler. Just like Moses, he smiled ruefully thinking back to the old stories – exiled into the wilderness after all the hardship he had faced. Well, if he could do it, thought Joseph, I guess I can too. The stories he had known since childhood gave him courage.

Yes, both the accounts from Luke and from Matthew are narrative fabrications, and there is no actual historical accuracy to either account. But these familiar, enduring stories are there to tell us that God comes to us even when we are fed up and frustrated. We want things to be peaceful and predictable and they just aren't. Above all, Christmas is a deeply human space. It's a celebration of embodiment and that these fragile, vulnerable bodies are the space where God chooses to dwell. Immanuel – God-with-us – is revealed in between the lines of the well-known stories. It's not a story of 'everything's going to be ok now', but rather, a story of Word-made-flesh, of God entering the space where we say "I'm just so DONE" and we are afraid, grieving, but still managing to catch moments of gladness. That's the place where God comes close to us.

Find a still, quiet moment tonight where you can stop and let that fill you – that on this night the hopes and fears of all our years are met, and we notice them, and give thanks that the Word came to dwell among us, full of grace and truth.

A holy and blessed Christmas to you all.