

A quick rehearsal: "Happy Holidays!" you: "Merry Christmas!"

Times change, so this year I took a look at Joseph's Facebook page to see how things are going.

"Finally arrived in Bethlehem for the census. It's 75 miles, mostly uphill. Took us seven days, because Mary is so tired. She's only 14, and she could have the baby any time.

"Crowded in Bethlehem. No rooms at Motel Six. The nice hotels wouldn't even talk to us. Guess we look too poor or dirty. We ended up in a stable, like two animals! This place stinks. Manure everywhere. It's filthy. The only clean spot is a feedbox; the baby will be born onto straw.

"And I'm supposed to believe that Mary's baby is from God, that he or she is special, maybe even the Messiah? What kind of God would come to earth as a baby anyway, much less surrounded by dirt and poverty? Gotta go. She's calling for me; something's happening"

Friends, at last we have arrived at the deep meaning of all our Christmas activities. We stand before the manger, the foodbox. We kneel before the Baby. God made infant. The Lord of the Universe, the creator of everything, is wrapped in baby clothes.

God approaches gently, helpless, wailing, totally dependent on teenage Mary and trusting Joseph. God still does approach gently. Oxen greet him, sheep recognized him. Shepherds—who were not churchgoers, who did not obey Jewish law—shepherds came to visit him. But at the INN there was no "room;" the Greek actually means

there was no “hospitality” at the inn. Jesus wasn’t welcome. God approaches us gently still. Is there room for Him? Is there welcome in our lives? Or do I have a “do not disturb” sign over my soul—God being for emergencies only?

Did you get a Christmas card from me? Probably not. I mailed only a dozen; you’ll have to share. Most of them said very simply, “This day Christ was born for me.” It’s from St. John Chrysostom. Not for everyone else, certainly not so we could shop and eat and drink. “This day Christ was born for me.” To save me. Because, unless someone takes a long, honest look at yourself and is completely pleased with all their thoughts, all your feelings, all your words, all your actions—unless you are perfectly purified, then you need a Savior. “This day Christ was born for me”—because I have failed and I need help. “Grace has appeared”—as the bible puts it.

“The Word was made flesh.” A word of hope, a word of forgiveness, a word of mercy. Christ was not born for angels, those perfect, heavenly being. He was born for shepherds, real people who live real lives in a muddy world.

This day, Christ was born for you—no matter how many or how serious the sins you have committed. Christ was born for you, no matter how rarely you pray, or how infrequently you come to church. If you are lost, Christ is searching for you; if you are living among the pigs, he will welcome you back home.

As you may know, December 25 was considered the longest night of the year. It was a good date to celebrate that Jesus is the Light of the World. The ancients missed it by a few days. Already the days are beginning to lengthen and the dark of night is less and less. These are dark days indeed, for the nations, our own country, and our own hearts, but the Light already shines. There are glimmers of goodness and love all around us.

In the year of our Lord 2012, may the divine Light shine upon your soul. May all of our lives give birth again and again to the One who was born of Mary so long ago. May the Word become flesh again and again.