

## Sermon: The Rev. Andrew T.P. Merrow

December 18, 2016

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7 • Psalm 96 • Titus 2:11-14

When the stabbing pain had subsided, Mary lifted up her head and she immediately gave a prayer of thanksgiving that Joseph was still watering the donkey. So he had not seen her double over and cry out. You see, she had made a vow to herself and to God that morning when they set out from the village of Nazareth that if she went into labor she was not going to let Joseph know because he was worried. And she knew he was worried. The census coincided with her being ready to deliver, and they had to travel a long way and he didn't know how he was going to get it done.

They saddled up early that morning, and they had been walking for seven hours. But, finally they needed rest. And the donkey needed rest and so they had stopped. But, they knew they still had a ways to go and that they had to get to Bethlehem before dark. Because Joseph knew all too well that, although there were lots of people travelling for the census, once darkness came the bandits would have the upper hand and he would not be able to protect his wife and the unborn child.

And so she was grateful because it was clear that he was tiring. It was clear that he was scared. And she did not want to add any more burdens to this wonderful man who rightly could have dismissed her but instead chose to stand fast with her. And not only stand fast with her but believed, as did she, that the message of the angels was true. That for some reason they had been chosen by God to carry out a task that had to be done. And so he lifted her back on to the back of beast and they set out.

She noticed that his gait was slowing and that dusk was fast approaching. He had sent a cousin of his ahead of time who had said that at the top of the steep hill, beyond the olive orchard there was a cave that had three grottos. One was tucked back, and he was quite certain that would be a safe place if indeed Mary had to deliver. But if that was not possible there was still another that would be just fine. And then the third was exposed to the air. That's where the travelers kept their beasts, bringing them in out of the cold and the weather.

As darkness grew near, and as Joseph still had to ascend that hill, she noticed that his hand on the staff leaned in ever more heavily. And then it happened. The donkey stumbled at the exact moment that she had another violent contraction, and she could not help herself. She cried out in pain, and she saw her husband turn with absolute fear on his face and his right hand tightened around the donkey's bridle and he held onto his staff for dear life.

But then, she simply smiled at him and he smiled back. No words were exchanged because no words were necessary. They both knew that in her belly she contained the Word of God, the Promise of God and that together they would go forward. And, thus he turned and continued up the hill.

By the time they arrived at its crest it was fully dark. And not quite knowing where to go he just kept plunging further into the darkness. And then suddenly people appeared out of the shadows. Men came and took the donkey from Joseph. And women came and slid Mary off the beast's back and ushered her into safety. Unfortunately, the cousin was wrong. There was no room. There was no place. So the women took fresh straw and placed it right where the cow was lying down, providing safety and warmth.

And Mary gave birth. When she gave birth there was absolute joy resounding off the walls of the cave. Everyone, everyone was so excited. At the top of their lungs they were chanting and screaming and, for ten minutes, absolute joy. And then Mary and Joseph collapsed, exhausted. And Mary nestled into her husband's arms with her child held close to her breast. And they fell asleep.

But, then strangers appeared. Joseph sprang up and grabbed his staff and the other men formed a semi-circle around the new mother and child, not knowing whether there was danger or not. And instead, this remarkable display of shepherds, nobodies, saying, "We have seen the most amazing sight; this child, this, is the promised Messiah." And again joy erupted and filled the cave as this unbelievable news became real.

That first Christmas was a cacophony of joy and fear, of endurance and faith, of love and struggle, of community, of danger. That first Christmas night, my friends, is exactly the same as this Christmas night. We live in the same world. The difference is that you and I get to go forth from this place and we get to spread the good news: that the light has overcome the darkness; that the light of God's love shines brighter than ever because it shines in each and every one of us.

That's all you and I have to do. It's everything we have to do: To let a world know that God has come for us. That God is for us. And God will surround us and lead us and take us to places of deep and abiding joy. What a wonderful gift this night is. What a wonderful gift we can be for each other and for a world that desperately needs to hear the message of the angels.

Amen.