

Title: *In the First Light*

Text: Luke 2:1-7

As I was listening to our choir sing their cantata a couple of weeks ago, they sang a song that I have really liked since the first time I heard it, probably 25 or so years ago. It's *In the First Light*. As I listened to that song that I've enjoyed for many years now, it struck me in a way that it never had before of what a clear, concise message of the gospel is contained in that song.

I want to take just a few moments to go through the words of that song, alongside the well-known and beloved words of Luke 2:1-7, this evening.

Verse 1 says,

*“In the first light of a new day no one knew he had arrived  
Things continued as they had been while a newborn softly cried  
But the heavens wrapped in wonder knew the meaning of his birth  
In the weakness of a baby they knew God had come to earth.*

God came to Earth in utter humility. Joseph and Mary were two very ordinary kids, who you could say were victim to forces and egos at work in the world much larger and more powerful than they were.

The decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be registered so Joseph and Mary went to their ancestral hometown of Bethlehem.

This was in keeping with the words of the prophet, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Here we have Mary this young, devout girl, far from home, just her and her husband far from home (in those times) in such a remote, out-of-the-way place. We've heard the words hundreds of times. She brought forth her first born son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. The song continues:

*As his mother held him closely it was hard to understand  
That her baby, not yet speaking, was the word of God to man  
He would tell them of his kingdom but their hearts would not believe  
They would hate him and in anger they would nail him to a tree.*

The way Jesus' life ended was almost foreshadowed in the inauspicious circumstances of his birth. This past Wednesday, I shared with our Wednesday evening crowd, as is my occasional tradition Barbara Robinson's story *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. It's a delightful story that tells what happens when the Herdmans who were the worst children in the world show up at church and decide that they want to be in the Christmas pageant.

These rough kids had no real awareness of the Christmas story and the director has to explain to them about all of the different things in the Christmas story that they didn't understand. It was striking, and humorous to hear the Herdmans react to a reading and explanation of the Christmas story.

Robinson writes, “Among other things, the Herdmans were famous for never sitting still and never paying attention to anyone - teachers, parents (their own or anybody else’s), the truant officer the police – yet here they were, eyes glued on my mother and taking in every word.

“What’s that?” they would yell whenever they didn’t understand the language, and when Mother read about there being no room in the inn, Imogene’s jaw dropped and she sat up in her seat.

“My God!” she said. “Not even for Jesus?”

“Well, now, after all,” Mother explained, “nobody knew the baby was going to turn out to be Jesus.”

“You said Mary knew,” Ralph said, “Why didn’t she tell them?”

“I would have told them!” Imogene put in. “Boy would I have told them! What was the matter with Joseph that he didn’t tell them? Her pregnant and everything,” she grumbled.

“What was that they laid the baby in?” Leroy said. “That manger . . . is that like a bed? Why would they have a bed in the barn?”

“That’s just the point, so Mary and Joseph had to use whatever there was. What would you do if you had a new baby and no bed to put the baby in?”

Later, Imogene Herdman says, in reference to the swaddling clothes, “You mean they tied him up and put him in a feedbox? Where was the Child Welfare?”

He wasn’t recognized. Herod would try to kill him. Folks would ignore him. He would be stigmatized because of the questionable circumstances of his birth. We might look at such a child born today and lament, “He never really had a chance.”

We’ve bashed the innkeeper for being heartless and cruel all these many years. Actually, he did what he could. He gave them a guest room where they could have some privacy and some dignity.

Yet, John wrote about Jesus, “In him was life and that life was the light of men.” As he grew and as he spoke and as he taught, light emerged. Light shone forth.” There was great joy and great hope. The song continues

*But the sadness would be broken as the song of life arose  
And the firstborn of creation would ascend and take his throne  
He had left it to redeem us but before his life began  
He knew he’d come back, not as a baby, but as the Lord of every man.*

Life arose in Jesus Christ. To as many as received him, he gave the right to become children of God. To as many as would say, I’ll make room in my life for you.

Wally was big for his age--seven years old. Everyone wondered what role the teacher would give him in the annual Christmas play. Especially considering the fact that he was also a slow learner. Perhaps he could pull the curtain. To everyone's surprise the teacher gave Wally the role of the innkeeper. The boy of course was delighted. After all, all he had to learn was one line: "There is no room in the inn." He had that down in no time. Then came the night for the program. The parents took their places. Every seat in the auditorium was filled. The children

entered singing "Oh come all ye faithful." The lights dimmed. A hush moved over the audience. The curtain opened on Scene One. Mary and Joseph entered the stage and walked up to the inn. "Please sir, my wife is not well. Could we have a room for the night?" Wally was ready for his line. He had rehearsed it all night. He began, there is, and he hesitated. He started over again. There is. . .and again his mind went completely blank. Everyone was embarrassed for him but poor Wally just didn't know what to do. Joseph thought he would improvise and started walking away toward the stable on stage left. Seeing him walking away Wally in desperation called out: "Look, there's plenty of room at my house, just come on home with me."

*Hear the angels as they're singing on the morning of his birth  
But how much greater will their song be when he comes again to earth  
Hear the angels as they're singing on the morning of his birth  
But how much greater will their song be when he comes to rule the earth!*

It was easy to ignore him when he was born. But one day, he's coming back and every eye will see him. Does he have the pre-eminent place in your heart?

Preached at Salem Avenue. December 24, 2011. Christmas Eve

