

## **CHRISTMAS DAY REFLECTION 2023**

**By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule'ale'ausumai**

As I sat at home on Sunday evening last week preparing for this Christmas Day service and I thought, what can I say that will make this Christmas different from other Christmases, what can I say that will make Christmas more real for you today than in the past? At the end of this service we will each go our own separate ways and some of us go home to join family in a traditional Christmas dinner, others will go to the homes of friends and family and share a meal there. Some hopefully no-one here will be going home to an empty house, no special food, no presents, no Christmas tree. Christmas for many around the world is just another day, for those in war-torn Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Palestine the place where Jesus was born.

In that place a census in the Roman Empire was taken periodically to see who could be taxed and who could be forced into military service. Judea was part of the province of Syria, and from ancient documents scholars know that censuses took place there every fourteen years. It is likely Joseph, along with the other men of his tribe, had to return to the tribal headquarters – Bethlehem. The journey was approximately 80 miles, and travelers took their own food. The “inns” provided fodder for the animals, and a common courtyard with a fire, on which they could cook. After a long journey, which would have taken some time, Mary’s baby was born, probably in a common courtyard – He was swaddled according to the custom of the day (partly to protect him from disease and dirt) and laid in a “manger”. This word means “a place where animals feed”, so could have been a

stable itself, or the feeding trough. It reminds us of the words Jesus Himself spoke – “foxes have lairs... but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” The shepherds who came to see the new-born baby were among the many people looked down on by orthodox “good” people of these days. This was because the nature of shepherding, and how the shepherds lived, meant that the shepherds were unable to observe the strict hygiene regulations.

The journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem: 80 long miles; carrying their own food; cooking over open fires with other travelers; no facilities except those offered by Inns (open courtyards with fires, and animal stalls opening from the courtyard) Mary gave birth away from her family and women folk. It is difficult to imagine a more stripped-down Christmas. Yet there that first Christmas were the people into whose care was given the Son of God, and they fulfilled God’s trust in them. The first Christmas was very, very simple

In contrast to this simplicity was the hopes which people then had for the Messiah they prayed would come:

- To overthrow the Romans
- To bring sovereignty and power once more to their nation
- Talk about our hopes and longings too

What is your Christmas story? I’m not asking about your family traditions, the gifts you exchange, the food you eat, or the way you celebrate Christmas, and I’m not asking you to tell me the Christmas story as recorded in the Bible (Luke 2:1-20) When have you, like the shepherds, gone “to Bethlehem [to] see this thing that has taken place?” Was there a time when you knew your life to be the manger of

Christ's birth. Was there a day when your life cradled new life, new hope, new possibilities?

The reason I am asking about your Christmas story is because I think we often leave ourselves out of the Christmas story. We always name Mary, Joseph, Jesus, angels, shepherds, wise men. But what about you and me? Do we name ourselves as essential characters and participants in the story? I sometimes wonder if we have become the forgotten characters of the Christmas story. I sometimes wonder if we focus on the particulars of Jesus' birth, the event, to such a degree that we omit ourselves from the story. When that happens we deny ourselves the experience of Christmas and Christmas is just another event in history.

I think that we may not want to limit the beauty and breadth of the Christmas story to the historical particularities of Jesus' birth. It's bigger than that. It's more than that. That Jesus' birth happened within a particular set of circumstances – a specific place, a specific time, a specific woman – doesn't mean his birth is limited to, defined by, or contained only within those circumstances. It means, rather, that we must look for and experience his birth in the particular circumstances of our own lives. Christ is born in the particularities of life, his and ours, then and now.

So where do we go to see this thing that has taken place and what does it look like? Start with the circumstances of our lives. What does the manger of your life hold? Hope, fear, joy, sorrow? Maybe grief and loss lie at the center of your life. Maybe it's thanksgiving and abundance. Maybe it's emptiness, a lack of meaning, or darkness that lie in your manger. Are you holding guilt, resentments, regrets? Is your manger full of pain? Where does it hurt? What concerns fill your life? What

lies in the cradle of your life? Whatever it is, whatever your circumstances are this night, that is the manger in which you will find the Christ child.

The manger of your life and the manger of Christ are not separate. They are two ways of seeing and describing the same thing. There is only one manger. For if Christ is not born in the real-life everyday circumstances of our lives he isn't born anywhere.

From that one manger we are all given new life, new hope, new possibilities. You see, that one manger holds more than circumstances and a baby. It always holds more than we can see. It held more than the shepherds could see.

That night the shepherds went to Bethlehem to see this thing that had taken place and they found "the child lying in the manger" but they had no idea how much more that manger held.

Whatever your circumstances are this year, know that the Christ child brings us an opportunity to transform our lives. If you didn't like the direction it was going in, now is the time to turn your life around and take a different pathway. God has come to us in the form of Emmanuel, God with us, so know that Christ opens the door for us walk through to a new beginning, a new purpose, a new focus. How might you be the Christ in the lives of others this Christmas? How might you be the presence of Christ in the lives of those who are struggling, homeless, lonely, lost and sick. Use the gifts that God has given you to be that lighthouse in the presence of darkness and sadness. Now go and may the light of the Christ child go with you. Amen.