

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Christmas to Epiphany 2011-2012

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, My sister-in-law is a Lakota-Sioux Indian from South Dakota. I have frequently said to her, "If your people had had a better immigration policy, we would not have the problems we have today." (It is one of those tiresome family jokes, only tolerated because it is family!) If it weren't for the fact that so many people and families are hurt by bad policies, it would be almost laughable to watch a nation of immigrants twisting and turning about how to deal with immigrants. Moralists and sticklers for the law are deeply offended that some people are here illegally! So, who was handing out visas at Jamestown? Cultural purists want to save America from the dark forces of - well - other cultures. That, of course is tinged with not a little white supremacist racism. Sorry, boys! Your ancestors blew that one when they brought in the first boatload of Africans, and blew it again when they absorbed one third of Mexico! Business and political leaders really do like cheap labor and easy votes. Unless you have had a very special high school history teacher like I did, you probably were never taught that in the early 20th century it was dead easy to get citizenship - especially in an election year when the ward bosses were getting out the vote. That was the era in which my ancestors arrived. If you don't see yourself in any of the foregoing categories, then perhaps you are of a kinder, gentler nature on the subject of immigration - like me. A bleeding heart liberal, some might say.

If you live in one of those places where nobody walks down the street or sits on the front stoep, you might be excused for mistakenly believing that human beings stay put. In reality the population is in constant motion. The migration of peoples probably began soon after the discovery of fire made it possible to consider any cave a suitable home. That trend continues to this day. Migration is everywhere. My parents' raised four children in central New Jersey. I am the only one still living in New Jersey - and I live within sight of the bridge out! People migrate for all sorts of reasons. Some want to improve their economic conditions or give their children better opportunities. Some are escaping natural disasters or social upheavals. Some may have been forced to move. Immigrants often hope that their move is only temporary. Sometimes it is. Migration requires energy, which is why immigrants are often among the very hardworking. This nation and other receiving nations usually do well because of them. As with anything human, problems can arise and need to be addressed. Migration can't be stopped, but probably should be controlled for humane reasons as much as anything else. Immigration policy should be in the hands of sensible and caring people who are not given to hysterical demagoguery.

Our Bible is the story of migrations. From Eden to Ur of the Chaldees, from Canaan to Egypt and back again, there is a search for survival and security, for meaning and for truth.

There is settlement and deportation, resettlement and diaspora. God's people never stay put.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered." (Luke 2:1-3)

The practicality of such a decree might be questioned, but governments are known to churn out half-baked policies. And so our Christmas story begins with a kind of reverse migration - probably more like a scramble, as everyone headed for the ancestral home. One can only guess that those with money found it easier - certainly easier than for a pregnant woman. Hotel space would have been at a premium under the circumstances and probably going to the highest bidder. This is the world into which Jesus came.

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem." (Matthew 2:1)

It is true that the wise men were not really immigrants. They were pilgrims - travelers in search of truth. But they illustrate that the Lord Jesus did not come into an insular world. The region of Judea was a place of conquest and migration, commerce and the exchange of ideas. The wealth and thinking of Asia, Africa, and Europe flowed through it. Nobody's culture could remain static and unchanged in such an environment - then or now!

"Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod." (Matthew 2:13-15)

The infant Lord and his family sought assylum. Herod died and the crisis was over. Joseph felt safe enough to return to the land of Israel. ***"But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth." (Matthew 2:22-23)*** Nazareth perhaps provided a place of stability for Jesus the boy to grow, but when Jesus the adult began to proclaim the kingdom of God we are told that he had no place to lay his head.

These stories of struggle and up-rootedness are at the heart of Christmas, yet our celebrations often emphasize the coziness of it all? The world of commerce has hijacked the season. It's all about exchanging presents - sweaters, gloves and scarves - even jewelry and automobiles at the high end. Then there is the "Martha Stewart industrial complex" of home decoration and holiday food! I hate to think what we have done to our children by the whole Santa and the toy-fest thing! I'm sounding way too much like the Grinch or Scrooge, I know! All of these things are - after all - mere baubles, which could be successfully handled by level headed people so that they remain just fun. What is far more upsetting is the way in which the stories themselves are too often transformed into mere baubles - ornaments of the season! They become cuddly, warm and fuzzy instead of being a prism through which we see the reality of our world.

The Good News at the heart of the celebration of the Christ Mass is that God loved the world so much that he sent his Son. He loves this world with all its ugliness, unfairness, confusion and restlessness. He sent his Son not to condemn, but to save! The Good News we rejoice in is not a baby snuggling in a warm manger bed, but the God who shares the cold and rough life of those who have no place - no room in the inn. It's not the shepherds

as humble workingmen touching the forelocks and meekly bowing that warm our hearts. It is the God who touches the lives of rough and unadorned working men and women and counts them worthy. It isn't even the grandees that we often portray the wise men to be. It is the Lord of Life who provides the glowing, hopeful star which attracts and is himself the end of the search for the Truth. Our God has taken our humanity and come among us. He came once in ordinary human weakness to share all that we have to bear. He comes still in all that life throws at us. He reveals to us that all will be well. We are in his heart. His Way of Justice, Mercy and Peace has come and will be unveiled at the end of time for all to see and share. In the meantime, he lives for us in his mysterious presence in Word and Sacrament which grips our hearts and reforms our minds that by joyful anticipation we begin to live in his kingdom. He transforms who we are into who he has called us to be.

We are always in motion - always migrating. For many of us it means actual physical motion for some not so physical. The old year brought us many things. In the new year there will be more. We can anticipate the whole range of human experience - the good, the bad and the ugly. The world's teeming masses, roiling feuds, childish pouting and posturing - all of this will be there in our faces. In an election year, you can bank on it! Men and women will continue in the pursuit of all sorts of things - most commonly wealth, power, and fame. As servants and worshippers of the Word made flesh we have a different standard. For us, real power is the power of Love - self-sacrificial Love - God's Love. For us, the only fame we seek is to be servant of all in order to hear the words, "Well done!" For us, the only wealth worth having is our faith and joy in Jesus, who said, "***I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.***" (John 10:10)

One way or another we are all migrants. All seek security or improvement. Some have no choice but to move on. Hopefully, as Christian believers we are also pilgrims in search of the Truth, so that our wandering is not pointless or our search in vain. "***Happy are the people whose strength is in you! * whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way. Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, * for the early rains have covered it with pools of water. They will climb from height to height, * and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.***" (Psalm 84:4-6) May the Christ Mass be a blessing to you on your journey. The Word was made flesh. He is among us. In Jesus we see the brightness of his glory. We who receive Jesus carry him within. As he draws closer to us, may we see him more clearly in others.

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