

He'd Come Here"¹
Luke 2:1-7, Hebrews 13:2
December 19, 2010

Bible Readings

²In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Hebrews 13:2

²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Sermon

After the Christmas Eve service,

my husband announced that he was hungry for breakfast.

"There must be some place open," he muttered as we piled into the car. Our son quickly placed an order for three hamburgers.

"No hamburgers," my husband said. "This is breakfast!"

After driving around for a while,

we finally headed down the interstate

and found a nearly deserted truck stop.

By now the children were half asleep and cranky,

but my husband led us to the door like a man on a mission.

The jukebox was playing something like,

"When You Leave, Walk Out Backwards

So I'll Think You're Coming In,"

and the only hint of Christmas

was some multicolored blinking lights around the large window.

The air smelled of coffee and bacon and stale cigarettes.

At the counter a one-armed man in a baseball cap

was drinking Pepsi from a bottle.

Two other guys sat at a table eating and talking.

I couldn't help wondering

where they had come from and where they were going.

We chose a booth next to the window

because the kids wanted to see if the lights

would make our faces change colors. They did.

A thin woman named Rita came to take our order.

¹ This story is an adapted form of the story written by Harriet Ritchie and published in the *Christian Century*, December 13, 1995

Rita looked like any waitress would look
 who had been unlucky enough
 to draw the late shift on Christmas Eve.
Old beyond her years,
 she managed a tired-looking smile as she handed us the menus. Our son was holding
the salt shaker upside down,
 spilling salt into his hand and licking it.
I gave him a disapproving stare
 and looked up just in time to see Rita give him a wink.
“Remember, no hamburgers,” my husband barked.
 “‘This is breakfast.’”
The kids moaned as they ordered pancakes and sausage.
I would soon marvel at their creative defiance
 as they ate the sausage between the pancakes, hamburger style.
Of course, this wasn’t my first breakfast
 at 1 a.m. on Christmas morning,
but all the others had been eaten off someone else’s china.
I suddenly realized the snob in me
 was really enjoying feeling out of place...
 and how, years from now, we would laugh and say,
 “Remember that Christmas
 we ate breakfast at the truck stop?
 That awful music and those tacky lights?”
I was staring out the window lost in my thoughts
 when an old Volkswagon van with Texas plates
 and an overload of luggage pulled up.
A bearded young man in jeans got out, w
 alked around and opened the door for a young woman
 who was holding a baby.
They hurried inside and took a booth near the back.
 “Where you headed?” the one-armed man asked.
I couldn’t hear their answer,
 but imagined anxious grandparents somewhere
 waiting to see their grandchild for the first time.
As Rita took their order, the baby started to cry.
 The father lifted the baby to his shoulder, but it didn’t help.
Rita poured them coffee
 as the mother took the baby and began rocking it in her arms.
“Why won’t that baby stop crying?” our daughter asked.
 “‘She hates country music,’” my husband said grinning.
 “‘She probably wants something to eat,’” I told her,
 remembering all the times
 I tried to drink a quick cup of coffee before a feeding.
The mother picked up the diaper bag and started to leave
 when Rita reached over and held out her arms and said,
 “Now, you sit down and drink your coffee, hon.

Let's see what I can do.”

There was something about the way Rita took that baby
that made me think she had raised half a dozen of her own.
She walked her and talked to her
and showed her to the men at the table.
They made baby-talk and silly faces.
Rita brought her over to us and showed her the blinking lights. “Just look at this little
darling” she said.
“Mine are so big and grown up.”

The one-armed fellow took a pot of coffee
and started waiting on tables.
As he finished refilling our mugs, I felt tears in my eyes.
“What’s going on?” my husband asked.
“Nothing. Just Christmas,” I said,
reaching in my purse for a Kleenex and a quarter.
“Go see if you can find a Christmas song on the jukebox,”
I told the children.

When they were gone, I said, “He’d come here, couldn’t he?”
“Who?”
“Jesus. If he were born in this town tonight...
and the choices were our neighborhood...
our church,
or this truck stop,
it would be here, wouldn’t it?”

He didn’t answer right away,
but looked around the place...
looked at the people.
“I guess, either here or at the homeless shelter.”

“That’s what bothers me,” I said.
“When we first got here I felt sorry for these people
because they probably aren’t going home to neighborhoods
with candles in the windows and wreaths on the doors.
And listen to that awful music;
I’ll bet nobody here has even heard of Handel.
But now... now I think that more than any place I know,
this is where Christmas is.
Only/But I don’t belong.”

As we walked to the car, my husband put his arm around me.
“Remember what the angel said:
‘I bring good news of great joy to ALL people.’”
“Thanks,” I said, but I wasn’t reassured.

The houses in our neighborhood were dark.
As we passed the Milford’s
I wondered what Christmas Day would be like for them –
their daughter had died in a car accident during the summer.
Next door Jack McCarthy had lost his job.

A little farther down lived the Bailey's
whose marriage was held together by the slimmest thread.
Mrs. Smith's grown son had died from AIDS.

And then it hit me...

except for the candles and wreaths,
maybe we're not so different
from the people in the truck stop after all.

After we tucked the children in,

I picked up a bible and read, "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for
they shall inherit the earth."

Then I found the Christmas story in Luke

just to be sure it really did say, "I bring good news to all people."

Many Christmases have passed since that night...

and I still believe that Jesus would be born
in what I'd call an unholy place.

But rich or poor or in between, we are all poor in spirit.

We all have more unhappy memories that anyone would guess... burdens that we never
share.

But the promise of Christmas is that it is those very places
where we are broken,

in the dark holes where something is missing,
in the silence of unanswered questions....

he comes... and the wondrous gift is given.