

Comfort and Joy

Music from another realm came to this place on Christmas Eve. It wasn't just the choir, it wasn't just the handbells or the organ. Something celestial filled this place – and when we sang “Joy to the World,” it was joyous.

Now all that is done. The guests have gone home. The leftovers have been picked over. Shepherds have said thank you for the lovely time, angels have fled back to the realms of glory, and exalted songs have settled back to earth.

On the day after Christmas, we took Rexene's folks into the city to see the Rockettes – almost as exciting as the Corn Palace in South Dakota. On the way out of Radio City, we met a tide of humanity seething beneath the mounted police. It was bitterly cold, elbows cut like blades just above the head of an eight-year-old, and we were desperate to find someplace uncrowded and warm. It took awhile, but finally we found a cozy little spot at Mulberry and Hester with warm bread. What comfort! What joy!

Along the way we passed any number of folks for whom there was no room at the inn. Hannah spied them sitting in doorways, holding cardboard signs. The train that carried us back home passed thousands, millions of people whose circumstances were not much better. Of course, it was dark by then, and in the windows of the train we saw mostly just ourselves.

But no sooner had it pulled into the station than the Christmas songs gave way to a horn from the fire department. That meant that Doug Lockhart was going out on calls even as his father lay ill. That horn could have been blowing for someone we knew. After all, this is the time of year when folks near death let go their hold on the world, forever changing the holiday for their families.

Other, less musical sounds came on the day after Christmas – the sounds of real life for workers who had been laid off, spouses in stressed marriages, kids pressured to please, girls in a family way.

If we're listening for heavenly choirs, well, from here on the Christmas story is stubbornly earthbound. Angels have fled; the manger is what remains. Beyond time and place, a child looks up from a bed of straw which his soft skin can feel through the bands of cloth. His mother nurses him amid the smells of the stable. What comfort? What joy?

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We're going to struggle a little this morning with the meaning of Christmas. Because we might have thought that the good feeling was supposed to continue – or at least that it would last longer. By December 30th, life as we knew it is settling back in place.

The manger is what remains. There is this baby, in a crude crib – really a trough, something totally inappropriate for a child – a solid reality. The child cries. Those of us standing around, whether we have come from Nazareth, or from fields with the sheep, or the nearby inn, or Manhattan, all of us standing there have responsibilities.

So we start thinking how we're going to make the child comfortable. One of the men offers a blanket that has kept him warm under the stars. Another looks for firewood.

A woman from the inn, knowing that this is the mother's first child, gently and privately offers her reassurance.

This is the all-important day after Christmas, the one that really counts. Now that God is with us, it's time to see if we will be with each other.

After all, everyone has had a share of discomfort. Mother and father have made a hard journey, from shame in Nazareth to indignity in Bethlehem. The working men have spent weeks out-of-doors, traveling a hard terrain, guarding a flock from predators. That kid who's trying to win a parent's love is grateful for the chance to babysit and get away from scholastic burdens. Everyone needs a bit of grace, and here it is, in the manger, as we are here for each other.

There is so much to wonder at, so much to make us all tremble. The heavenly messenger has said, "Fear not! For behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which is for all the people..." And it does inspire in us a strange joy. The young mother, when she hears about it, ponders all these things in her heart.

Here at the manger, with the very human child in a difficult world, we climb out of our own concerns and find strength together.

Ask Doug Lockhart what gives him joy – it's being there for others. Ask Jean Miller or Bobbie Earle, and chances are what gives them joy is really much the same.

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Some people have a strange notion of comfort these days. For them, the word means luxury. And what is worse, they have confused material comfort with joy. It's not only misguided, it's a moving target – for they can never get enough of things that they really do not need.

But comfort has another meaning – the strength that comes from someone's presence with us. It's very close to love.

Think of what it meant to those at the manger to hold and smell this newborn, to keep it warm, even if it didn't occur to them that this was the warm, living body of God incarnate. The shocking need at the manger had brought out the best in them already.

It was a scandal once upon a time to sing, "*Adeste fideles*, O Come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!" For there seemed to be nothing triumphant about the manger. It was so ignoble, so unworthy of a king.

For us, of course, it is the place where God is with us – right in the thick of a difficult world. And the amazing thing is how this newborn strengthens us, just as the old friend strengthens us when we are there with one another. The angels didn't come to announce more angels. They said that in the manger we would find Emmanuel.

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Just before Christmas, some intrepid folks from our church headed out on busy Post Road to go caroling. Now, on Sunday mornings, this church really sings. Even if it's a just a few of us, we make a joyful noise.

But there on the frozen lawn of Eileen Johnson's house, our group sounded pretty pathetic. Eileen didn't seem to mind, though – she just beamed from her doorway, encouraging us as we started out tentatively: *Joy to the world! The Lord is come...*

Linda Terhune had brought her kids because she felt that this was just one of those things that a congregation should do. To their credit, they went along gamely, and smiles stole across their faces.

After warbling through a few numbers, we asked Eileen what she would like to hear. She thought for a moment and suggested *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. So we straightened up and sang: *O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant...*

And her face just shone. We were there with her, and even more, she was there with us – encouraging us, unconsciously reminding us what a church family is all about.

She was here on Christmas Eve, still shining. It was joyous, joyous, wasn't it?

The song of the angels does continue, it is indeed endless. But really what is timeless is the manger – and it is the symbol, the reality, the reality of our comfort and joy.