

Christmas Eve - December 24, 2009
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner

Christmas Eve 7 and 9 p.m.

"May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your sight for you are our Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen."

In January of this year I went to Israel and toured the memorable sights....and spent a short visit in Bethlehem...so this week as I was preparing for this night, I kept imagining myself in that small town.... What it must have been like, how I would have reacted had I lived there so long ago. I hope you'll allow your imaginations to go with me back as I reflect on the events 2000 years ago imagining myself as the innkeeper's wife.

Things happen in our lives, and we are never again the same. That's the way it has been in my own life. It's been more than 30 years since that memorable night, but I remember it as though it were yesterday. 30+ years since we had such special visitors. My husband and I run a small inn and we have hosted hundreds of people over the years. I usually see our overnight guests, especially if they need a supper meal or their morning bread and olives. I can't say I remember every guest who comes and stays with us, but I remember many. After all, the guests do provide a change in our daily life. And life here in Bethlehem usually revolves around sheep, not people. Bethlehem, my town, is small. It is right on the road to Jerusalem but there's no big sign at the turnoff, or we'd get more visitors. But what we do have is lots of sheep. Sheep are everywhere, not just on the hillsides. Sheep are plentiful because Bethlehem supplies the sheep and lambs for sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. If you're noticing the smell, well, yes.... It is rather strong, but you get used to it if you stay here a long time. It's the shepherds --- lucky for me, they do not come for a room at our inn -- they just sleep out with the sheep. We really don't like having them in town.... It's bad enough that they graze their sheep on lands belonging to others, and that they smell, and that they do not keep themselves clean so they can participate in our religious activities. Shepherds do a job, all right, but we don't have much use for them ---shepherding is a despised occupation, though a necessary one.

My town, Bethlehem is known not just for sheep but also is a special town for religious people because we are written about by the prophet Micah, "You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah EFF-rath-a, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel."5:2 I had often wondered about that prophecy that one to rule would come from my small town; but I had no one to ask about it.

My town, Bethlehem, was bursting at the seams with travelers on this night that stands out in my memory. You see, we are ruled by the Romans -- they have complete power over the laws and taxes and ways things are run in this country. Caesar Augustus is our Emperor and at this time I'm remembering, Augustus ordered the enrollment of everyone--"a census be taken of all the

inhabited earth". This enrollment or registration in the public records of persons, together with their property and income was taken so the Romans could decide how much tax should be levied upon each person.

People had come from everywhere, because no matter where these people now lived, they had to go back to the town or place of origin for this census. This meant that there were all kinds of people in town – some were "lower class" Jews – members of other tribes; they just didn't fit in the better circles of Jerusalem. As Jews we all worshipped the same God and had the same religious practices, but we were really different people from different parts of the country – and our dress, dialects and mannerisms were different from each other.

Every available space for lodging was taken. The rich people certainly had a room to stay in. My husband and I even gave up our own bedroom so we could make a little extra money letting rich guests stay there. We put our own sleeping mats on the floor near the door for the night. We had every available spot taken --- anywhere a mat could be laid down within the walls of our house, we put one—we were going to earn good wages from these night's lodging guests.

But it was as we were all getting settled down that yet another guest arrived. My husband got up rather grumpy – to respond to the knocking at our door. A man was there asking for lodging – willing to pay. But we had no where to let him sleep. My husband came back to tell me that he felt sorry for the man --- but even more so for his very pregnant wife who was riding on a donkey – so he suggested that they go out to our stables, where they would at least be out of the night dew and chill. There was enough straw in the stable to make dry bedding for them.

Then, my husband and I drifted off to sleep. More knocking woke us up in the very early morning hours. My husband does not like his sleep disrupted.....he put on his heavy cloak and went to the door. Shepherds were there. Dirty shepherds. I heard him ask them, "What are you doing here? Why aren't you in the hills with your sheep?"

Then I overheard the most amazing answer from these shepherds, "We were out on the hills watching our flocks and all of a sudden an angel appeared to us and told us: "do not be afraid (because of course we were) for we bring good news of a Savior born. You will find him wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger. Then, there were angels everywhere. They were singing. They said, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." The shepherd told my husband, "we are looking for the Christ child."

By this time, I was wide awake. This was incredible excitement. Nothing this exciting happens in Bethlehem. When my husband returned to our sleeping mat, I had a lot of questions to ask him. But he didn't know much more. He said that he told them that there was a man and a very pregnant woman who went to the stable for the night. He said the shepherds began walking hurriedly toward the stable.

My husband laid down, pulled his woolen cloak around him and went back to sleep. I could not sleep. I pulled on my woolen cloak, lit a lantern and quietly left our sleeping area and carefully walked to our stables.

I shall never forget what I saw --- a father, a mother and a newborn baby— wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in the feeding trough in our stable. The shepherds who had come to our door were there too. They were watching this baby, kneeling down and worshipping him. I can't explain what happened to me, but somehow I was touched and moved to kneel beside that manger too. Not only had a baby been born near my home and our inn-keeping business, but strangely, I felt this baby and a special love had been born in my heart.

Such a beautiful scene --- such a peaceful, loving feeling there. The birth of a baby brings such hope for the future. The miracle of this new life was a reason for celebration, but along with the celebration, I had such questions and wonder. The birth of this baby seemed so normal with a father and mother, and yet this birth was so unusual with angels and shepherds and my own reaction.

That happened so long ago..... but I have never forgotten it.

That birth caused much trouble and heartache for many of us Jews in the next few years. You see, King Herod learned about this newborn baby from some astrologers who were following a star and looking for this new-born baby. These wise men said that the baby born was the Messiah, God's chosen one, the King of Israel. Herod was fearful that this child would be a new king, so Herod killed all boys 2 years and younger, to protect his throne. There was such wonder and love and such pain and hurt surrounding that birth. As a good Jew, I was looking for the Messiah, but could this tiny baby really be God's own?

It's been more than 30 years since that special night at our stable. Here in Bethlehem, things have continued in the usual manner--- we still have more sheep than people.

My neighbors have talked recently about a man named Jesus, who was born here. This Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher, a preacher, a healer, a miracle-worker and he promises a kingdom of God. Many people go to hear him, follow him, and some even think he is the Messiah. They say he was born in Bethlehem. I wonder if he could be the one who was born here in our stable long ago --- whose birth was celebrated by angels and shepherds --- that tiny baby I saw with his mother and father?

If so, what should I do.....what would you do? What are you doing tonight?