

Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-7, 8-20
The Rev. Chip Graves

In the midst of our crazy and fast paced lifestyles, I've come to appreciate 'simple and nice'. That's the way I like things. Ever watch a dog's face when he leans outside a car window -- pure ecstasy. Life doesn't get any better than that; the dog leaning out the window, smiling that toothy grin with eyes squinting, tongue wagging and ears flopping. *Life is good, simple and nice...*

But as we all know, life's not always that simple, not always that good; at least for humans. Take Christmas for example. Every year it seems to build up and up and up to a frenzied pace. You just can't keep up; too many things, too many places. In fact, the holidays can be very depressing even in the midst, especially in the midst of all those songs; *Jingle Bells, White Christmas and Frosty the Snowman*. It's just too much.

Maybe this year I want to be just a little less joyous, a little less ecstatic. In fact, I just want to curl up with a good book and quietly venture off to some far away place, away from all the holiday noise. *Simple and nice.*

I believe *unmet expectations* are the culprit. Yes, unmet expectations are to blame. It's like dreaming about that last piece of pizza in the fridge, only to find out your sister ate it the night before; or when you're running late for work, thinking you'll just barely make it, only to realize you're car's on empty. Or when you're in school and you just know you've got the right answer, so you boldly raise your hand and belt out the answer, only to realize you've just answered the previous question. Unmet expectations can be horrible, devastating.

However, this is not a challenge for today's gospel. Expectations are met. In fact, they are completely fulfilled. Prophecy has been fulfilled. I find Luke's depiction of Christ in manger most compelling because it's *simple and nice*; a simple story within a simple setting. That's what makes it so beautiful. The Jewish prophecy of a king, a messiah has come true; and better yet, without pomp and circumstance. In an age of mega stars, political hype and an overzealous pursuit of me-ism, it's nice to revisit Christ in a manger. This story refuels us, as it can each year, bringing us back to the basics – family, friends and community. *Simple and nice.*

A man, a woman and a child. That's it. These are our characters and the setting is quiet. It's like a family gathering this time of year, sitting before the fireplace sharing familiar tales of old. Storytelling, retelling events of the past. This is nice. And we're in the midst of one of the greatest stories, greatest events ever told.

Luke indicates there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the local establishments, or *kataluma*, the Greek term for inn. Actually, this term refers to an 'upper living room' as referenced again during the last supper setting. Recent archaeological excavations

confirm these ancient living quarters. Jesus was most likely born in the first floor of such a dwelling, where they kept a small number of animals. *Simple and nice.*

This time of year it's easy to get blue, depressed. Instead of glee and cheer we too easily attract melancholy. And it's understandable. There seems to be a tremendous peer pressure, to always be 'giddy' in light of this season. But sometimes the loud noise just seems too much; and for any number of reasons. 'I've just lost my job'. Or 'I just found out the cancer is back.' Or 'I just don't want to get out of bed today'. Do any of these ring familiar?

It's not like we're caught off guard. The holidays begin so early and come on so fast. Well before the leaves change, Christmas has already begun; holiday sights and sounds overwhelm us. When I was young, Christmas began after Thanksgiving. But no more. Even before I've passed out the last "Trick or Treat" or carved the last pumpkin, chocolate Santas appear everywhere. And every Tom, Dick and Harry Belafonte feels compelled to share with us their new version of White Christmas. My favorite is still Bing Crosby. All of this is just a little too much. No wonder we're tired. We just want something *simple and nice.*

Today's gospel is great because it's set to a non-anxious tone. We begin with an emperor decree for registration. Decrees are not exciting. They're done for taxation. We don't like paying taxes but this is nothing new, nothing out of the ordinary. They're taken every 14 years, keeping the empire fiscally responsible. And this one was undertaken by the Syrian governor, Quirinius. *Sounds like a new play- station game for the kids. But no.*

And there were rules with these ancient census registrations. All male head-of-households had to return with their families to the home town. *This reminds me of It's a Wonderful Life. I wonder what would have happened to George if his brother had returned instead.*

And then there's this aspect of travel. Joseph had to return to Bethlehem, about 80 miles from Nazareth, approximately a three day's journey. Not easy in those days; a man and his pregnant wife journeying for three days. And all of this for a census? *I say just email your stuff to H and R Block and have them deal with it.* But no. The empire has rules. So *let's keep it simple and nice.*

And when Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem, the city was completely crowded, bustling with those returning for the registration. No room at the local inns. Not even a motel six, to "keep the torch light on.' Ladies and gentlemen, in the midst of our crazy holiday season, it's nice to see Christmas in light of something simple and nice. And when your world seems upside down and beyond control, remember you are not alone, "that you will once again find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And if you listen closely, you still hear the angels singing, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!' May God bless you and your family this Christmas, always and forever more.

Amen. .

