

STABLE TO TABLE

12/24/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA
Christmas Eve (I): Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

I wonder if any of you have heard a new song called "At This Table" by Idina Menzel. She's a Broadway star who has a role in "Frozen 2". A parishioner recently sent me a link to the song, and as soon as I heard it, I wanted to listen to it over and over. If you'll indulge me, I'm going to play a little of it for you [<https://youtu.be/acRAIkV7QDc>].

It's like the St. Andrews theme song, right?

At this table, everyone is welcome
...everyone is seen
...everybody matters
No one falls between
At this table, you can say whatever
... you can speak your mind
...everything's forgiven

That got me to thinking: this is the Good News of Christ—that we are all welcome at this table to be nourished and reminded that we all belong here; that we—each in our own uniqueness—belong to God. But our Gospel reading, tonight, goes back even further than that.

It was at this stable that everyone was first welcomed. I know it sounds pretty corny: "from stable to table", but, it's got a certain ring to it, don't you think? From stable to table...that's what Christmas is all about—God's invitation to the world starting at this stable, and continuing, centuries later, at this table.

Jesus wasn't born in a private room in a sterile hospital with only his immediate family present. Rather, the most unlikely folks were invited to participate from the get-go: the innkeeper, the shepherds, the Magi; they were all invited to the stable. This mishmash of people, all gathered at the stable to behold Emmanuel, which, if you remember, means "God with us".

Now, when we talk about tables at this time of year, I'm guessing you all have your own stories about your family gathered around the Christmas table. One of my holiday memories is from my high school years. At that time, the family on my mother's side was so large we held our Christmas Day celebration at my Grandma's bar.

Most years, it looked like any other large family's gathering. The food was lined up and down the length of one countertop, and then everyone would eat at other counters, or the cocktail tables in the pool room. Then, after enjoying the meal, the kids played board games or went sledding outside, and the adults played cards.

On that particular Christmas Day, most of the parents were playing a card game called "Pitch" in front of the part of the bar where the bartender usually sat. At some point, in the early evening, from out of nowhere, a gunshot rang out through the building. People went running in all directions—adults grabbing children and men barking directions. It took several minutes for someone to figure out that the gunshot came from within.

Unfortunately, my uncle had left a loaded shotgun tucked under the shelf near the bartender's stool. In their curiosity, two of the younger cousins had accidentally fired the gun. Luckily, most of the buckshot lodged in the wooden frame of the counter, and no one was hurt. Needless to say, however, it was a disturbing event and many relatives went home early.

I share that story, because I know you each have your own whacky Christmas-table stories. As much as we might think that everyone else's holidays are picture-perfect, there's often some complication or challenge that has to be dealt with in our families: someone gets sick, there's an argument, the pecan pie burns.

And, yet, it's in these messy, complicated and frustrating places where God breaks in. Well, the truth is that God's always breaking in, but when things are rosy, we don't notice as much. Just like a light shining in the midst of a sunny day—even if it's very bright, it's only when that same light shines in the darkness that we recognize how dazzling it is.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned how sometimes our re-telling of the scriptural story has the effect of "sanitizing" the realities of the circumstances. Our nativity story is like that. It's so sweet to see the baby Jesus lying in the manger, but think of what that must have been like...to be denied the safety of a hospital, or at least the comfort of a hotel room, and to give birth, instead, in a stable!

Mary and Joseph's story is messy and complicated! Luke's version tells us they were engaged; they weren't yet wedded, and, yet, here's Mary, with her belly round and full, protruding in a way that would have been impossible to hide. Maybe that's why there was no place at the inn—the scandal of it all!

This young girl, who said “yes” to God’s call, must have had to bear all kinds of judgment and ridicule. And, then, she has to give birth among animals with the smell of manure wafting through the air, and the rough texture of straw beneath her.

Yet, in the reassurance she receives, we are also reassured. “Do not be afraid,” says the Angel. Of course, those words: “Do not be afraid,” are about the same as ominous music starting to play in the middle of a movie—we know things are about to get complicated!

While the others are terrified and amazed, “Mary treasures[d] all these words and ponders[ed] them in her heart.” Even though it was messy, complicated, and frustrating, God breaks-in in a way that Mary could see, and she treasures the experience.

I read in an Advent devotional by Richard Rohr, that he believes this is why there’s so much focus on the poor in the Bible, because it’s easiest for transformation to be appreciated in someone who has so little. Even though Mary was an unwed mother; even though she had to give birth in a stable, even though she had no idea what she was in for, she said “yes” to bringing the Christ-child into the world...and not as some completely removed royal family, but fully into the human condition!

Nor is it royalty, or respected religious leaders, who are given seats of honor at the birth of Jesus. Rather, it’s an innkeeper, shepherds, and Magi—whom we call “kings”, but are more accurately magicians and astrologers—who are given a ringside seat. And then, those same people—the vulnerable and the unimportant by the rest of the world’s standards—are given the role of being the first to share the Good News with the rest of the world.

As we make the journey, from the stable to the table, that pattern continues. The Samaritan woman at the well, a dozen or so fisherman, and a tax collector, are enlisted to help evangelize their communities. In God’s kingdom, those who are vulnerable become powerful instruments in God’s plan.

So, here’s more good news. We don’t have to wait until we are authorized to participate in this counter-cultural reign of Christ. By simply being born, we are given leading roles in the Christmas story.

The song I played earlier continues:

There's enough for everyone
So come as you are
Remember that the door is always open
...The perfect gift that you can bring is your heart

Our holidays...our lives...are not always neat and tidy, nor wrapped up in a big red bow; and, yet, even in the mess...God breaks in...from the stable to the table...we are all invited.

Merry Christmas! Amen.

“At this Table” Lyrics:

Watch the video: <https://youtu.be/acRAIkV7QDc>

At this table, everyone is welcome
At this table, everyone is seen
At this table, everybody matters
No one falls between
At this table, you can say whatever
At this table, you can speak your mind
At this table, everything's forgiven
There's enough for everyone

So come as you are
Remember that the door is always open
Yes, come as you are
The perfect gift that you can bring is your heart
So, come, come as you are

At this table, there will be no judgement
At this table, mercy has a seat
At this table, we're all sons and daughters
There's no place I'd rather be

So come as you are
Remember that the door is always open
Come as you are
The perfect gift that you can bring is your heart
Come
Come as you are
Come as you are, oh

Collect of the Day:

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--
 on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
 you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
 and the bar across their shoulders,
 the rod of their oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
 and all the garments rolled in blood
 shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
 a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
 and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
 and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
 He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
 from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Psalm 96

1
 Sing to the LORD a new song; *
 sing to the LORD, all the whole earth.

2
 Sing to the LORD and bless his Name; *
 proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day.

- 3
Declare his glory among the nations *
and his wonders among all peoples.
- 4
For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised; *
he is more to be feared than all gods.
- 5
As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols; *
but it is the LORD who made the heavens.
- 6
Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence! *
Oh, the power and the splendor of his sanctuary!
- 7
Ascribe to the LORD, you families of the peoples; *
ascribe to the LORD honor and power.
- 8
Ascribe to the LORD the honor due his Name; *
bring offerings and come into his courts.
- 9
Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness; *
let the whole earth tremble before him.
- 10
Tell it out among the nations: "The LORD is King! *
he has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."
- 11
Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;
let the sea thunder and all that is in it; *
let the field be joyful and all that is therein.
- 12
Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy
before the LORD when he comes, *
when he comes to judge the earth.
- 13
He will judge the world with righteousness *
and the peoples with his truth.

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

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. Joseph 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And 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.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

[When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]