

FINDING PEACE AT CHRISTMAS

December 24th 5:00 pm

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(Matthew 1:18-2:12 NRSV) Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. {19} Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. {20} But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. {21} She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." {22} All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: {23} "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." {24} When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, {25} but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. {2:1} In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, {2} asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." {3} When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; {4} and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. {5} They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: {6} 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" {7} Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. {8} Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." {9} When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. {10} When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. {11} On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. {12} And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Can anybody tell me what this is? <<play part of waltz>>

I am not very musically gifted — but I can recognize the signature sounds of a waltz.

What gives a waltz its characteristic lilt and lift is the number of musical beats it contains in each measure of music. That easily identifiable waltz beat is called "3/4 time" -- it has three beats to a measure.

Listen again to a waltz, and you'll hear it ... <<play part of waltz>>.

The first of the three beats is usually the accented beat, the second two beats softer and unaccented: "Dum-de-de, Dum-de-de."

The waltz, popularized in the later 19th century by Strauss in the lavish social circles of Vienna, became enormously successful. Everybody who was anybody was dancing the waltz to Strauss' hypnotic 3/4 beat. If you were not doing a waltz you were out of step with the culture.

But what makes a waltz a waltz is also, ultimately, what makes a waltz a pretty boring piece of music.

Its slavish devotion to that 3/4 beat limits the variety, the drama and the joy that a waltz can communicate.

Like the waltz dance step that accompanied it — step, two, three; step, two, three — a piece of waltz music seemed to go on and on as if it were some perpetual motion machine —

always beautiful,
always in harmony,
always predictable,
always dull.

Despite our human tendency to blame God for everything bad and hard that happens in our lives, we rarely find a reason to accuse God of being boring.

Earthquakes,
famine,
flood,
disease,
death

or even the everyday tragedies that mar our lives

bounced checks,
burnt dinners,
bad relationships,

bossy coworkers,
broken promises
brawling kids
are all somehow blamed on God.

When people and problems in our lives get too difficult, too big, too messy, too overwhelming, that is when we feel God has abandoned us to the forces of fate, or evil or despair.

What these frantic few hours before Christmas should remind us, is that it is exactly during these most hectic, harried, hardest moments in life that God's presence draws closest to us.

In Luke's birth story, Elizabeth is far beyond child-bearing age, yet she finds herself pregnant with her first child. Imagine her overwhelming feelings of joy and anxiety. At last a child to love and care for!

Care for?!

Suddenly in her old age Elizabeth was going to be expected to take on all the exhilarating but exhausting duties of motherhood.

Could she do it?

How would she manage?

Was she up to it?

Her anxiety must have been running high. Can you imagine the chaos that she was feeling? But the mental state of her young relative Mary must have been even more chaotic.

Mary, too, was unexpectedly pregnant. She was betrothed — but not yet married to Joseph. And Joseph was a bit upset.

Mary was young and poor and had been utterly average in the expectations she had for her life. She had been anticipating setting up a household with Joseph, establishing herself in her new role as wife, and then, hopefully, becoming a mother.

Instead, she had to deal with a rather unexpected visitor — who brought a rather unexpected message.

Mary you are pregnant
and if that wasn't enough

Mary the child you will bear will be the Messiah.

I imagine that from that moment on, Mary's life had no peace — she was clearly filled with Christmas chaos.

Yet both Elizabeth and Mary respond to the revelations and situations present in their lives by fully opening themselves to this unexpected divine presence.

Elizabeth feels the vigorous movement of her baby, the "quickenings," and is overwhelmed with an insight into Mary's condition that is revealed to her.

Mary responds to Elizabeth's greeting by delivering one of the most beautiful prayers of praise we have in all of Scripture.

The "Magnificat," as Mary's hymn is usually termed, is an astonishing example of what kind of unexpected beauty and inspiration emerges when find the peace that God offers to us.

God takes a simple, humble, young woman and looks "with favor on the lowliness of his servant," transforming and exalting her. Mary becomes "blessed ... among women" -- because she refuses to succumb to the chaos and instead responds with faith and trust.

Jesus was born in a stable — can you imagine what that must have been like? A stable a small, cramped, congested, messy place. This new-born baby was out-of-place, amid the dusty animals, the mucky straw, the sneaking vermin, the spilled grain, all the usual smells and sounds and sights found in a stable.

But the mess is the message of Christmas: There is no stable, no place in our world or in our lives that is too poor, too remote, too outcast, too "other," too messy, that God cannot be found and God's peace transform us there..

Christmas is here!

If you are like me — you probably are finding yourself at wits' end, running out of time, out of patience, out of money, out of ideas.

The demands of work and the responsibilities we bear refuse to "take a holiday" and keep the pressure on, despite our longing for some simple Christmas cheer.

Don't be fooled into thinking that God cannot draw close to your life, to your heart, just because your schedule seems "too busy" for Christmas. Even if your circuitry is all hovering near overload, you could be on the very cusp of experiencing the genuine peace of God in your life. Open up to it, exalt in it, and be willing to let the Spirit of God "do great things for you" , who knows what you will find.

I want to end with a story that I found the other day that I think perfectly

illustrates the opportunity of finding peace in the midst of chaos. It is a story told by Anita Wheatcroft in *"How Far to Bethlehem."*

She says that this is a true story that happened in a large church in New York City where she grew up. During an annual Nativity pageant, the church was especially full. Hushed in darkness, the congregation watched the lighting of the candles.

She writes:

Toward the back, I sat, one timid little girl, with my family. Newly moved to the city after a family separation and trauma, my life had settled down, but I was still overwhelmed and homesick for my grandparents and familiar friends. That night, however, caught up in awe as organ music rolled out from balcony to rafters, I heard a familiar story I loved, and was transported to another time and place. Down the aisle swept a colorful procession as the lights went up, revealing the magnificent manger scene. Travelers, bearded shepherds and finally the three kings bearing gifts advanced majestically. Before anyone knew it, I found myself following them.

The journey down that long aisle was an early spiritual pilgrimage for me, yet it felt like a kind of homecoming. When I reached the manger scene, there were a sleepy donkey, real sheep, and Mary and Joseph beneath an angel with outstretched wings. Above all, there was a light in the manger, enfolding us in its glow. Kneeling in front of it, I had a sense of exaltation, of self-offering as real as any I have ever known since. This was real to me, and I was there. Of course, it didn't last long. I was lifted to my feet by an usher and carried down the aisle, back to my embarrassed family, and the pageant swept on. I was vaguely aware of subdued smiles, and my parents' whispered scolding didn't matter. My discovery was my own, and I had something now that no one could ever take from me. I had been to Bethlehem. I had seen it all for the first time and I would never forget it.

Amidst the chaos of her life — Anita Wheatfield found the peace of Christmas. May we too find that kind of peace.