

Among the cast of characters

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2009.

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." Luke 2:1-2

Each time we hear the nativity story from Saint Luke, there is always something in it that we see in ourselves. We are all born of a mother. Like the innkeeper, we were provided with a place to be born and nurtured. We were fortunate in not being born in a stable with a manger and sheep and cattle; most of us were born in a safer environment in a hospital.

The questions this night are, "How is the Christ child born in you? How do you grow into knowing him personally? How do you enter into the drama of the nativity story to make it your story?" When you enter into this ancient drama, you may see yourself identified with one or more of the characters, whether the child, the parents, the shepherds, the wise men, or the angels. Just as you may have once had a part in a Christmas pageant, so you can relate to one or more of the characters in that tender scene. You can feel the joy in those who came to visit the new born savior and bring a gift. You can feel the fear of the parents for their newborn in having to flee the wrath of Herod. Joseph and Mary are your parental figures that played an essential role in your growth and development emotionally and spiritually. They saw in you the potential for a developing faith. It may have been a parent or teacher or friend who had confidence in you and encouraged your potential. Someone cared for you and affirmed you by nurturing your spirit. They helped you realize that you are a person of worth and value. That parental figure may have appeared in different people along the years, but you remember who they were and what they meant to you. You don't forget people like that.

The Wise Men in your life were gifts in themselves because they realized your strengths and talents and encouraged you to discover and develop the gifts you had been given. These are the ones who offered encouragement at just the right time when you needed it. They might not have realized it then and if you were to tell them now, they might not even remember. They are those special people who are secure enough in themselves to be affirming of others. They told you what you needed to hear and you are grateful that they were part of your learning and maturing.

You may not have thought of it at the time, but you may have experienced angels in the form of strangers who appeared and offered help just when you needed it and disappeared never to be seen again. Whether or not you believe in angels, they were God's messengers and the skeptic in you is nevertheless still grateful for them and what they did.

There were also the animals, maybe not sheep and cattle, but a special pet that you loved and who loved you unconditionally. And when they died, you were assured there was room for them in heaven.

There may have been a Herod somewhere in your life. He was the one who made life difficult and sometimes fearful for you. You did what you could to avoid the wrath of that dark figure that caused you anxiety. At some point you were able to take control of

these difficult characters and realized that they had no power over you unless you let them. Christ Jesus as the light who comes into the darkness helps us overcome the fearsome and threatening characters in our lives.

For each of us, there is a child, a parent figure, an innkeeper; a safe place to call home, pets that gave you companionship, angels as messengers of God, and a Herod whom you learned to overcome.

Jesus is not always found where we expect him. We tend to look for him in pleasant and predictable places, but since he was born in a crude stable in less than pleasant conditions, then we can expect to find him today in remote places among the outcasts who live on the margins of life. We find him among those who suffer chronic and terminal illnesses, those who live in substandard conditions and those with jobs that don't pay enough to afford decent housing. You will find him with those who risk their lives fighting terrorism in far off lands.

On this glorious Christmas night, you will find him in many places and times and conditions. Unless Christ's story can be lived out in us, the meaning cannot be fully realized. What we celebrate this holy night is that the story is real in each and every one of us. What lies before us now is the work of making the Christ story real in our lives and in the lives of others.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost, to heal the broken,
To feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

Howard Thurman 1900 – 1981