

Grace to you and peace, from God our creator, Jesus Christ our savior, and the Holy Spirit our keeper. Amen

“In those days a decree went out...”

I love that beginning of this the most wonderful of stories. “In those days...” With these words Luke tenderly and gently shows us that this story comes from outside of us and our time, that this story is a gift, that this story is *the* Christmas Gift.

I also love those words because they are not so far removed from me, from my experiences, from my time that I can't relate. They are not the set up for fantasy or fairy tale, but tenderly and gently, invite me to deeper truth, the kind of truth you need to slow down for in order to remember, to allow your self the curiosity to be drawn in, to behold the extra-ordinary wrapped yet again in the ordinary. “In those days...”

They open for me the chance to reflect on these days, my struggles, my joys, my pains, my challenges, my failures, my triumphs, my confusion. These days are dramatic days. These are days of record. New lows in unemployment, state and national budgets strained under the weight of two wars, sales upon which so much seems to depend, housing foreclosures, the markets, the economy. New record lows of worry, doubt, frustration, and even fear about what will be.

We have put our faith, despite our best intentions, our best efforts, in things which can not bear such precious hope. We have oriented ourselves towards things we thought could and would always take care of us, that would save us. Now it is dark and cold and we are wondering.

When I was about seven or eight years old we lived in Lengby, a northern, rural Minnesota community. One night around Christmas time a high school girl, her name was Jean, was out driving when her car broke down. She decided to leave her car and try to make it to the next farm, or whatever that was down the road. She thought she could make it on her own. It almost cost her life.

The next morning the police found her abandoned car and after a short search they found her, hunched over, half buried in a snow bank, frozen, with no discernable signs of life.

They rushed her to the hospital and called my dad, her pastor. Through the care and expertise of her doctors and nurses, they were able to revive her with warming blankets and baths. And with the prayers and love of the faithful of that community she became the Christmas miracle of those days. Thanks be to God.

This is the story of our days. It's nothing new. Left to our own fears, our own devices, our own means, we always turn away, and then turn in, concerned mostly, and then soon, only with our selves. We think we can handle it, if only I can focus on myself. We think we can make it, we believe *we* can make it. But somewhere, down deep in our

thoughts, our feelings, our spirit, we know better. We know where this story ends. It ends in the dark and in the cold.

That is also where God's story begins. "In those days..." In those days of ordinary dark and cold, ordinary stables, ordinary cloths, ordinary animals, ordinary people. In those days of ordinary, God gives us the amazing. God gives us his story, in the flesh of his own son, naked, vulnerable, dependant that we would see in him, ourselves, our best selves and remember.

Maybe you come here tonight as Mary, blessed with the vision of what could be, what will become of this Christmas gift of new life for the sake of the world. Maybe you come as Joseph only with dreams and the promise of hope and direction whispered into your sleeping ear. Maybe you come as shepherds torn from your ways by the glory of God, trying to make sense of it, returning again amazed to your fields. Maybe you come with the simple earthiness of the animals, lucky to be there, utterly dependent on what lies in that manger.

However you come here tonight, whatever your story, this story, God's story is for you. Pick up this Child. Hold this story of amazing love close to your heart. Carry this future of peace with you, in your here and now as the prince that he is. Be saved in this story. For to you is born this day a Savior, who is the Christ, the Messiah.

Turn again, by his love for you, to your neighbor as well as yourself. Turn again and behold the hope of God for you, in you, even as you struggle, especially as you struggle. Put your hope, put your belief in this manger; put your faith in this story.

It is in this most holy night that God's story and our story become one. How will you write the rest of your story with God? Let it be guided by the gift, the miracle of this night, the Christ Child.

In these days...  
Thanks be to God!  
And Merry Christmas!