

When we think of acts of God, we tend to think of earthquakes, floods and tornados. Many hazard insurance policies specifically exclude these so-called acts of God from their coverage. Yet tonight, we celebrate and remember a most extraordinary act of God under the most ordinary of circumstances.

You might recall that Alanis Morissette had a top ten hit several years ago. The refrain of the song includes the following lyrics: *What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus, Trying to make his way home.* Really, there's no need to wonder "what if" because tonight we celebrate and remember that God IS one of us. God was born! Just like the vast majority of us, we can be sure that it was a messy, wet, bloody, smelly affair even though Luke does not go into the gory details. We can be sure that his parents viewed the birth as miraculous, just like most parents do. At the time of his birth, they didn't realize just *how* miraculous it was.

It's likely that Joseph was a skilled craftsman. As such, he would have found plenty of work in the growing Roman Empire to support his family, so it's possible that the Holy Family was not impoverished but

working or middle class. I'm sure we can appreciate their situation. The government has ordered them to take part in a census and like good citizens they obey. Unfortunately Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem is apparently a good place to be *from* and the local places to stay are overwhelmed. Also unfortunate is that the timing couldn't be worse for the couple – the baby is at its due date.

Those of us who fly occasionally are aware of seemingly arbitrary and inconvenient government dictates. We don't fly often enough to complete the paperwork to by-pass security. If we happen to be very pregnant, we wait in line with everybody else to clear security, pulling our luggage and shoes in hand. If there is a winter storm that causes delays and our flight is cancelled we have the hassle of making other arrangements and might find ourselves sleeping in an uncomfortable plastic chair over night or for an extended period of time. If we decide to leave the airport for more comfortable accommodations, we too might find that all the hotels are booked and we're stuck in the waiting room. Mary and Joseph are similarly stuck, and after the baby was born, the exhausted parents laid him in the only place available to them: an animal's feeding trough.

Compare the holy family's situation with that of the shepherds. The shepherds are hanging out with the sheep. They aren't reporting to their hometowns. Being a shepherd was among the lowliest and least desirable of occupations. Nobody of importance, not the government, not the well-off, worries about the shepherds. They are beneath notice or concern.

Today's modern day analogy of "shepherds" might be those who are victim to human trafficking like garment or restaurant workers, or migrant farm laborers or undocumented day laborers. Closer to home, they might be our prospective resident in our house on South Essex Drive, which we rent to Three Oaks Homeless Shelter. Our resident will have some sort of disability that keeps him or her from working, or working for a living wage. Such a person is beneath our notice. Such a person is a "they." "They" don't appreciate nice things or living conditions, if they did – they wouldn't be living on South Essex Drive! "They" are lucky to have a roof over their heads. We, who rely on the income from Essex House to make up our budget deficit, see no reason to freshen up the vacant apartment with a new coat of paint or to make other cosmetic improvements because "they" are different from us and our homes; "they" have a different value system of how to keep nice things nice. And it is to such as "they" that the angels of

the LORD appear. For while WE might not notice or find “them” worthy of consideration, God notices. To the very “least of these,” the angel appears to let them know that a savior, the bringer of justice and peace, has just been born. Out of joy and praise of the LORD, and not out of compunction, they travel to Bethlehem to see this great sign that God has promised them.

Once they arrived, and found Mary and Joseph, they told them what they had seen and what they had been told by the angel. This must have both astonished and reassured the Holy Parents. They, too, have had an encounter with an angel, either in person or in a dream. To have someone, even lowly shepherds, confirm what they had been told had to have been a relief. Luke tells us that “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

Many of us have had an experience like Joseph, where we had a dream that we were supposed to do a particular thing, and shortly thereafter, someone in our waking life makes the exact same suggestion. That moment is a Holy Spirit moment, a confirmation that we need to act on our inner knowing. Often, such a Holy Spirit moment gives us the confidence or the courage or determination to pursue a given course of

action, despite whatever obstacle might appear. Holy Spirit moments are available to anyone who pays attention, they do not depend on anything other than that.

In the same way, the good news that God has acted in the world, that in the person of Jesus Christ, God's reign has begun to be fully revealed, that justice and peace will ultimately prevail for us ALL – not just the dispossessed and unnoticed, but for us ALL is very good news indeed. The infant Jesus spent his first moments in a feeding trough and now the bread and wine are distributed from this table to equip us to be Christ's body in the world. Let's us come to the table rejoicing - rejoicing in God's gift to us, rejoicing in Holy Spirit moments.

As we leave here tonight, let us be like the shepherds, glorifying and praising God for this good news. Let us act like we believe this good news, and strive to pay attention – to Holy Spirit moments and to those people and things that escape our notice. Tonight, let us be like Mary and Joseph, both of whom said “yes” to God's plan and did their part to assist in the inbreaking of God's Kingdom. Let us do these things for the glory of God and help usher in God's reign. AMEN

