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| **A picture containing shape  Description automatically generatedSt. Andrew’s By-the-Sea*****The Episcopal Church*** ***in Destin, Florida*** | **THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD** CHRISTMAS **December 25, 2022** |

**A homily by the Rev. James J. Popham**

If we have been watching a modern biopic – *The Crown* comes to mind – we may have begun to realize that these very informative, even revelatory, pieces do not purport to provide a detailed linear moment-to-moment or even factually precise story of the subject’s life. Instead, the typical episode will center a particular event. By focusing on such significant events and interactions, the filmmaker can impart a true understanding of the subject’s character or foibles or strengths or weaknesses or insights or blind spots. The episode will speak great truth even if some finer factual points of the story may be questionable or even demonstrably incorrect. They may not recall exact words. They may not recall which room in the palace the event took place or what date, day or time of day it was or how may Corgis followed the queen into the room. A lot may be left out. Which takes us to the infancy narrative from the Gospel according to Luke that we just heard…a lot of detail never made it into the story. But does that matter?

For example, what animals witnessed the birth of Jesus and sacrificed their food trough so Jesus would have place to lay his head? We typically see models and depictions of cows and sheep and lambs and donkeys and – for those of you familiar with the motion picture *Love Actually* – lobsters surrounding the manger…duh. But Luke never tells us, so we will never know.

And was it in a stable or a cave or the local Holiday Inn. The more likely reality is that Jesus’ birth took place in the common area on the first floor of the first century equivalent of Motel 6, where guests resided on the upper floors and their animals were held in a courtyard at ground level, where we must assume that only the animals were allowed at the free breakfast buffet. But does it matter?

And let’s face it, we really have no idea what date Jesus was born. One tradition is based on the notion that the early Christians hijacked the celebration of the winter solstice or the contemporaneous Roman carnival of Saturnalia, which featured feasting, gift-giving, candles, and wreaths and honored the agricultural god Saturn – a process that seems to be working in reverse in our current culture.

December 25 also fits a second view, that Jesus’ conception and death took place on the same date, 30 or so years apart. And we do know that Jesus’ death took place around Passover in the spring. Therefore, nine months after his conception, his birth around December 25, works for us. But probably not so much for Mary and Joseph, who likely would have preferred a warmer time of year. The temperature tonight in Bethlehem is expected to fall to 46 degrees Fahrenheit. But Luke, who investigated these events with the intensity and purpose of Woodward and Bernstein has no birth certificate.

But Luke wrote not so much as a historian, but as a theologian. He tells us just what is important, and that is who Jesus was, the long-awaited Messiah, who would bring peace, love, and hope to a troubled world.

 Joy to the world! The Lord has come.

Thus, for example, Luke places the birth if Christ during the time of Augustus? Emperor Augustus was acclaimed for bringing peace to the Roman Empire. But when the angels proclaim peace on earth, they suggest that Jesus, not Augustus, is the truly divine purveyor of genuine peace and would so supplant earthly powers like Augustus.

Also, by placing Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, Luke confirms Jesus’ line of descent from King David that conforms to the prophecy which identifies Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Furthermore, the census is an omen. The arrival of the true peacemaker during a time of brutal occupation was a signal that human power was no match for God’s.

That Mary and Joseph found no room in the local inns has been understood as a warning that human hearts cluttered with earthly values and surrounded by temporal distractions would fail to accept him, if not outright reject him. And, perhaps, it reminds us of why our tradition demands radical hospitality and inclusivity. Jesus never turned anyone away. And neither do we.

But where Luke drives his message home is in the appearance and message of the angels. Because what Luke was all about was joy and celebration of God’s grace. And who most dramatically conveys that? Those angels we hear singing on high every Christmas.

The message of the angels, conveyed by the shepherds, reassured Mary and Joseph – and all of us since – that the infant in the manger, announced to Mary by the angel Gabriel and to Joseph in a dream, was, indeed, the Messiah.

God was coming to earth as one of us, as a human being to show us who God was. In all of the Hebrew Bible, God had remained inscrutable. Even with the Law and the prophets and the sages, we were still in a muddle and a mess. But in the person of Christ, God would walk among us and show us who God was and show us God’s way.

And if we fail to see that as a great reason to rejoice and be glad, can we see that the greatest reason for joy and celebration may well be that in becoming fully human, as Jesus was, God would know and understand what it is like to be human. That God would judge us, not as a distant overlord, but as a peer. And not against some impossible, divine standard, but against the realistic expectations of what it is like to be human.

God would be no demanding tyrant, but a loving, compassionate, and merciful God who walked with each of us – just as we are – every step of the way. Imagine that. What could be more worthy of a joyful noise?

Joy to the world, the Lord has come. May we join with the angels and all of heaven and nature and sing to celebrate the wonders of his love.