

December 24, 2016—Christmas Eve  
Christmas (I)  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

Have you ever been in a stable late at night? I was nearly 40 years old when I first had that experience. It was my first winter after moving to Vermont. On January 2, right after the turn of the millennium, I started working at a horse farm that stabled a couple dozen horses. It was mostly a day job, but sometimes I went back—right about now—for the late night check and water.

During the day, when there is an endless stream of tasks and people, stables are lively and noisy. But at night—the work finished, the humans gone, the lights out, and the doors tightly shut—stables are bracingly still and quiet. When you slide the door open and slip in, it's like stepping through the veil between one reality and another. The shift is especially striking when the night has the crystal clarity that comes only with bitter cold: outside is all sharp and crisp; inside is all subtle and soft. Imagine velvet darkness relieved only slightly, by the tarnished glow of a few tired electric bulbs. The only sources of heat are the bodies of the animals, but they provide enough to warm even the most frigid night. The horses also contribute the few occasional sounds: a pair of nostrils puffing silky breaths; a wooly winter coat brushing dry straw. The mixture of scents that is only found in horse barns is like incense filling the air.

That winter in Vermont, after entering the stable at night, I hesitated to leave. Sometimes I would just sit on the dirt floor, in the dim light, leaning against the wood of a stall. If I sat still and waited, the night wrapped its arms around me, safe and cozy. Maybe that's what it's like to sleep in heavenly peace.

Wondering whether other people feel this way, yesterday I asked my wife Jakki, "You've been in a barn at night, right?" With no hint from me, her immediate reply was, "Yes, and it's a glorious thing." She continued on, "I've even been in a stable at night waiting for a birth—a horse, a cow, a sheep ... but no baby."<sup>1</sup> I told her that was probably just as well.

Heavenly peace is almost certainly not how things begin for Mary and Joseph. No pregnant woman wants to traipse around the countryside on a donkey. No spouse wants to *accompany* a pregnant woman who is traipsing around the countryside on a donkey. Mary and Joseph reach their destination, only to room with animals. Here it is, Mary's first birth, and she's far from home, without the help and encouragement of the midwife, her mother, or other women from her community. Mary is very young, but she knows the dangers she faces. In her time and place, childbirth is usually dreadful and often deadly, even under the best available conditions. Mary's conditions are far from the best.

Earlier in his Gospel, Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel visits Mary to lay out God's plan, and that Mary quickly assents. She appears to take not even a heartbeat to think about it. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."<sup>2</sup> Mary says "Yes" without stopping to list the positives and negatives, or to decipher what she will get out of it, or to calculate whether the deal is fair. As events progress over time, Mary's "Yes" turns out to be a costly one. I have to think that Mary knows that in her heart right from the beginning; she knows it even when the "Yes" is coming out of her mouth. For now, here they are in Bethlehem, doing their best to cope. A stable is not at all what they were looking for. But maybe it's *exactly* what they *need*.

Let's return to that horse farm in Vermont. When the owner asked me to work there, she knew it was unlikely. Even as I mouthed words of acceptance, immediately and irrationally, I knew it was outlandish. No educated, white-collar, slightly-built woman in her late thirties, who has never worked at hard labor, does such a thing. Well, I did, and ended up working there for about six months. I spent a lot of time mucking stalls. It was hard labor: when I wasn't working at the stable, I was at home *recovering* from working at the stable. Physically, mentally, and spiritually, it was the toughest work I've ever done. *And* it was quite possibly the most important six months of my life. One should never underestimate the power of shoveling horse manure. During that time, one forkful at a time, I worked through a lot of things. By the end, I was finally able to accept God's call to ordained ministry, a call that for years I had been working very hard to ignore.

That's way too much about me. Here's the point: We are rational people and ours are, for the most part, rational times. We are cautioned against making rash decisions; most of the time we *shouldn't* make rash decisions. Still, sometimes, our decisions should and must come from someplace other than gain or logic or practicality. Sometimes, a person has to go with their heart instead of their head. Sometimes, even knowing the likely consequences, God calls, and we *have* to say "Yes," because it's the only thing we *can* do. But here's the deal: God makes the ask, *and* God provides the stable. Every time we say "Yes," it's another opportunity for Jesus to be born in the world.

We need Jesus now as much as ever. Mainline churches of all denominations have for years been fretting over their very existence; we now face immediate challenges to the values we hold most dear. Every place we look seems fractured with violence and need. The situation may sometimes seem hopeless, but I'm pretty sure it's not. I think God is calling us in new and interesting ways. Maybe it's our chance to do exactly the work we've needed to do for a very long time.

In this year's annual Christmas message, the head bishop of The Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, said this: "This child, [Jesus,] when He grew up, came to show us the way to live lives of love, lives of compassion, lives of goodness, lives of kindness, lives of justice. This child came to show us how to change the world. So this Christmas, make room for him to change us. This Christmas help us change the world. And make a new commitment, to go out from this day, to let this Christmas Day, be the first day of a new world."<sup>3</sup>

Right now, there are people seeking a faith community like ours; others are in need of the gifts that only our community can provide. I have no idea what's next. The signs of this are coming from all directions. I might not yet know the specifics, but I'm pretty sure that, as is always the case, God is calling us to let love grow in our lives, and to be open to love that will come to us in new and different guises. All we have to do is say, "Yes."

That first Christmas Eve, two thousand years ago, despite or maybe even because of her circumstances, Mary safely delivers her baby boy. Love is born into the world. The message of the angels who visited Mary and those shepherds is really this: Incredibly improbable events are unfolding, but do not be afraid. It's a message that never grows old: Do not be afraid. Sleep in heavenly peace. With the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, God is with us always.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Private conversation with Jakki Flanagan, December 23, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:38a, NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Curry, "Presiding Michael Curry's Christmas Message 2016," Episcopal News Service (online), December 12, 2016, available at <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2016/12/12/presiding-bishop-currys-christmas-message-2016/> (accessed December 23, 2016).