

**The Rev. Thomas M. Murphy**  
**St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Owings Mills MD**  
**December 24, 2022**

**Christmas Eve**

**Isaiah 9:2-7**

**Psalm 96**

**Titus 2:11-14**

**Luke 2:1-20**

**Early Christmas**

Well, Merry Christmas, everyone!

We're here to remember and celebrate an event that took place in a particular time and place, back two thousand years ago, when a great headcount was ordered that forced many people to leave their homes, including Joseph and Mary, who, in the midst of many challenges, were about to bring new life into the world.

Think about Mary and Joseph, traveling among so many displaced people, all at the mercy of the powers that be.

Think about righteous Joseph, probably still bewildered by God's big ask: that he stay by Mary's side and love and protect her and her holy child.

Think about faithful Mary, pondering all God has asked her to do, carrying God into the world, giving birth to the Holy Child who would change everything.

Think about both of them, far from home, far from the women of Mary's family who would have midwived the child – think about both of them unable to provide adequate shelter for the newborn child, placing him in a manger, a fancy word we use to dress up a feeding trough used by animals – definitely inappropriate for a baby, but giving us a hint that Jesus will be Food for the world.

Think about Joseph and Mary, who, like all parents, were making a lifelong commitment, swearing a promise that will last long after the angels returned to heaven and the shepherds went back to their fields.

We are here to remember and celebrate an event that took place in a particular time and place: when Jesus the Son of God was born through and among a couple of nobodies far from home, born into a world that didn't seem to have much room for God.

You know, one of the great joys of being the rector of St. Thomas' is that there are so many people – generous and talented parishioners along with our hardworking and devoted staff – so many people who put in so much time and effort and talent to make things happen here, week after week.

And, as you would guess and can surely tell, these people have been in overdrive during the past couple of weeks, and especially the last few days – making it well worth our while to brave arctic temperatures to be here tonight.

They've been using their talent, creativity, and even employing some daredevil-like feats to decorate our church so spectacularly (I mean, come on, look at this place!).

They've been rehearsing all of the beautiful Christmas music that we love so much.

They've been creating, copying, and folding a mountain of bulletins.

They've been making sure that everyone is scheduled and ready play their part in our service.

It's been just amazing.

But, you know, even with all of this generous help and incredible talent, I don't feel quite ready for Christmas! It still feels to me like Christmas has arrived a little early, before we were quite ready for it.

Maybe it's just me. But judging by how, over the last few days, I've seen people driving like maniacs on the roads and in parking lots – it would seem that lots of people don't feel fully prepared, that, somehow, though it falls on the same date every year, we are having an “early Christmas.”

I've heard plenty of people kicking themselves for not being more on top of things, but maybe, just maybe, God is trying to tell us something through the “earliness” of Christmas.

Maybe God is telling us that, while preparation is definitely a good thing, the truth is we can't ever be fully ready for God's arrival into the world.

All we can do is stick together, like Mary and Joseph.

All we can do is offer the best we can, even if it doesn't seem like much, certainly not enough.

All we can do is trust that God will give us the strength and grace we need to keep our promises.

Because, here's the thing: while today we are remembering and celebrating an event that occurred in a particular time and place, the truth is that, ready or not, “early Christmas” happens all the time.

God breaks into our world all the time – inviting us to especially welcome Christ in the stranger - the stranger who has little or nothing and looks to us for love and care.

Now, if you've been around St. Thomas' over the past few months, you already know where I'm going with this.

If not, you should know that over the past few months we have welcomed and sponsored two young men from Afghanistan – Hizbullah and Abdul.

After a long and arduous journey, these two strangers came to us with almost nothing, trusting that we would make room for them and care for them.

I'm not sure if they were bold enough to hope that we would love them, but that is exactly what has happened.

And so, whether we were ready or not, it feels to me like we had an early Christmas this year here at St. Thomas'.

God has once again arrived in an unexpected place place, through and among displaced people, who, in the eyes of the world, would seem to be nobodies.

And, while I don't know what I'll find under the tree tonight, I think I already received my most meaningful Christmas gift a couple of months ago, when a few of us were over at the house where our Afghan guests live. Hizbullah offered us tea. But this wasn't just any tea. It was fragrant tea made using saffron, the precious spice that was one of the few items that Hizbullah was able to carry all the way from Afghanistan. And he wanted nothing better than to share his treasure with us.

Merry early Christmas.

And so, thanks to a lot of amazing people, this evening we are having a glorious celebration of Jesus' birth.

And in the days ahead, let's keep our eyes and ears and most of all our hearts open, because God is sure to keep on appearing in the most unexpected places and among the humblest of people.

Merry Christmas to you all!

Amen.