

New Years Day, January 1, 2018: Holy Trinity Church

The Feast of the Holy Name: Luke 2:15-21: *Becoming Jesus for the World*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

After 6 years of listening to my sermons, you know I am a big fan of the funny pages in the newspaper because I find much wisdom and sermon material in them not to mention some laughs along the way. I remember an old Family Circus cartoon. Dolly was sitting with her baby brother on her lap and she was telling him the Christmas story. It went something like this: "Jesus was born just in time for Christmas up at the North Pole surrounded by 8 tiny reindeer and the Virgin Mary. Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys and stuff and some swaddling clothes. The 3 wise men and Santa's elves all sang carols while the Little Drummer Boy and Scrooge helped Joseph trim the tree. In the meantime, Frosty the Snowman saw this star...."

That was quite a Guest List Dolly dreamed up wasn't it? At Christmas we all start making our lists and checking them twice. We get out the Christmas card list and update all the addresses and decide to whom we're going to send cards and who we're going to take off the list. We start planning Christmas and New Years Day dinner for the family gatherings and start looking at the Guest List of who's going to be there. And the ones we hope won't show up because nobody really wants them to be there. You know what I mean. Good ole Uncle Louie who talks so much no one else can get a word in or what about Mr. & Mrs. Know it all. Aren't they a treat? You see the guest eyes at the table glaze over and stare off into the wild blue yonder as they pontificate. It might not be right, but we all have those list reviews in our heads, haven't we?

I got to thinking about those Guests Lists. And I got to thinking about the first Christmas and who was on that Guest List. We get a clue from this morning's Gospel beginning in Luke 2

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the

highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

The shepherds were probably not on anybody else's Guest List except God's. Not only were the shepherds invited, they received God gold plated invitation and the Red Carpet treatment through God's angels.

If you compare God's Guest List with our guest list, you'll notice that we don't always have the same people on it as God. Do you remember what God said through the prophet Isaiah? *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;*

That's not exactly the folks who are on our List is it? The folks on God's list make most of us uncomfortable. And yet, sometimes, God moves through those people to break down the walls and barriers that separate us.

In the book, *Down and Out in Providence*, Bishop Wolf tells her story of life on the streets of Providence as a homeless person. She recounts one Sunday morning going into one of her downtown churches dressed as a homeless person. She was filthy and in her words, “not smelling so good.” She took a seat towards the front of the church half way through the service. She was seated for a few minutes when an usher came and told her this section was reserved for church members only and she would have to sit in the very back of the church by the door. As the usher escorted her to the back of the church during the prayers of the people her eyes filled with tears as she heard the congregation pray for “Geraldyn, our bishop.”

The Bible says that sometimes we entertain angels unawares. Bishop Wolf was one of those angels for the people for that church. At Christmas, the scriptures remind us to treat everyone with dignity and love. That person may just be an angel in disguise. We're called to treat every person as if they were Jesus. You see, they just might be one of those people on God's Guest List. I don't know about you but I don't see the shepherds visit to Jesus, Mary and

Joseph in that stable as a somber event. The Shepherds, of all the people on the earth, showed up to rejoice in what the angels told them. I believe they were a welcome sight for the Holy Family and I believe they all celebrated and I believe there was music at that first Christmas Party because the angels sang.

On this New Years Day, you and I are called to be the music in the background that allows the world to hear the true message of Christmas. The message that tells us that the party God is throwing doesn't require us to bring any presents, just an open heart. Instead, when we come, we receive the greatest gift of all. We receive God's Son, Jesus. We're called to keep singing the message of Christmas throughout the New Year because at some point in time, there's a moment of silence or quiet. The cash registers will quit ringing. The crowds will have all gone home. The doors to the stores will be locked and silence will blanket the world like snow. And then, the beautiful angelic strains of Christmas music can be heard telling us the meaning of the Christmas story.

In the comic strip, For Better Or Worse, little Elizabeth is sitting near the Christmas tree, looking at the neatly wrapped gifts. Her father says, "Elizabeth, it's too early to open anything yet."

Elizabeth replies, "I know. I was just thinking about all the kids who don't have presents to wake up to. I was thinking about kids in the hospital, kids who are lonely....I was just thinking how lucky I am." Then she pauses, looks up, and says, "Christmas is Jesus' birthday, isn't it, Daddy. I wish I could give him something." Dad smiles, gives her a big hug and says, "Honey, you already have!" You and I have been invited to the greatest party of all, not only that but we've also been asked to help host the party. We're in charge of refreshment for the soul, offering the water of life and the milk of human kindness. We're in charge of all the aspects of the Christmas Party here on earth except one, the Guest List. The Guest List is solely in the hands of God, Who announced it through the prophets and then turned it over to Jesus. On one Christmas Eve, I asked the children of the parish why the angels came to the shepherd boys and not the Emperor Augustus. Almost in unison they said because Jesus came for everyone, wisdom from the mouths of babes.

During this New Year, we are called to make sure OUR Guest List coincides with God's Guest List. We're called to be ready to welcome all God's Guests to the Party especially those whom we find "not smelling so good." because God has given us the best gift possible, His Son. When we have done that, when we welcome the folks on God's Guest list, then we're offering God the best gift of all, and the music of heaven, the music of that first Christmas will

be heard even above the noise of the whole world. And once again the music of heaven will become flesh and blood in our hearts as we become Jesus' for the world. Amen.