

**CHRISTMAS - 2006**  
***“An Amazing Story”***

Isn't this a good story; a homeless young couple in a strange city looking for shelter? The wife is expecting a baby. And just in the nick of time, since her time had come, they find a stable, and she gives birth to her firstborn son. Being poor, they wrap him tightly in strips of cloth to keep him secure and warm, no cozy blankets or anything like that. And for a bed, they commandeer a feeding trough for animals and soften it with straw. No cradle, no mattress, like their baby would have had if they didn't have to travel to Bethlehem for the census. That darn census upended all of Joseph and Mary's plans for the baby. Now, they were nobodies, in a nowhere place, with nothing to their name.

As St. Luke weaves the story of Jesus' birth, we can see that each detail has been carefully crafted to set us up for some amazing news. But Luke doesn't just come out and say what the significance of that good news is, as he weaves that into the details of his story as well.

Now, while, all this was going on in the stable, an angel appears to some lowly shepherds in the night, scaring the willies out of them. But the angel insists that there is nothing to fear. In fact, he has some great news, news that will fill them with joy and eventually all people. Then, the angel reveals to the awe-struck shepherds that in the little town of Bethlehem (*I imagine him pointing his wing toward the east.*) something big has happened. While they were tending their flocks, a baby boy was being born who just happened to be the savior for whom the faithful Jews had been waiting centuries. And to add to the wonder of it all, it's like the angel said, *“Of all the people in the world, God wanted you to know first!”* And before that amazing news could sink in, the heavens broke open and a zillion more

angels not only began to sing Glory to God, but also to promise that peace would come to the planet earth. Can you imagine? Peace on the planet earth because of this baby?

Like I say, it's a good story. It's a great story. But I skipped one critical detail. It all happened this way because Caesar Augustus was in control of the world. And his was a world of violence, of wars, of struggles for power, of excessive taxation, and even of religious claims made by the Roman Empire of men becoming gods. It is a world where privilege means everything, and wealth and comfort are for the few. And everyone else is at the mercy of that few. Hidden in the details of the story, St. Luke masterfully draws the symbolic lines of struggle between Caesar and Jesus that will become more obvious as time goes on; a struggle between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. You see, Jesus does not fit into the kingdom of this world. In his world, men don't become gods; God becomes a man.

The stable, the manger and the shepherds all align Jesus with the poor and the lowly. By contrast, Caesar lived in a palace, slept in a magnificent bedroom and was surrounded by the rich and powerful. What influence would Jesus have had on the world if he had aligned himself with Caesar, or Herod? What hope would there have been for ordinary people, not to mention the poor, oppressed, weak and marginalized? Jesus wasn't impressed with wealth or power or celebrity. Jesus didn't gather an army around him to keep him safe. To the contrary, Jesus gathered a band of followers who walked with him armed with nothing but his message of truth, justice, compassion and love. For Jesus, being safe didn't mean having protection. It meant not worrying about the future because he was doing the will of his Father.

And yet, it was on the occasion of the birth of this Jesus that the astounding promise of peace was made to the world; “... *and peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests.*” Jesus’ birth was the beginning of something entirely new, different, unheard of. He was going to do things a new way, a way that would challenge to socks off anyone who took him seriously. He came to call us to a whole new way of seeing reality, a whole new way of seeing God, a whole new way of seeing the world and the people in it, even our enemies. Jesus just doesn’t fit into the *status quo* ways of our world, try as we might to make him fit.

Let me use an obvious example. We have learned the hard way that “wars to end all wars” just don’t work. We’ve played that card again and again over the centuries, at times even trying to make them sound Christian, but we are still praying for peace. I am not questioning peoples’ good intentions or their desire to do right. You know how they say, “*A little learning is a dangerous thing?*” Well, I think a little Christianity can be a dangerous thing, too. If we really believed in Christmas, in Jesus, the Prince of Peace, not forgetting the details of the Christmas story, I don’t think we would be so eager to align ourselves with violence, or with the powerful, the wealthy, the privileged. We would look much more closely at the impact of our actions on the lives of ordinary people, especially the poor, powerless and marginalized.

Today we say we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Do we really celebrate it? Does the incarnation preoccupy our thoughts? Forget the presents, trees and lights. What’s going on in our hearts? Do we feel anything stir? John Shea wrote about a little girl telling the Christmas Story her way. How does our response to the amazing news of Jesus’ birth compare to the little girl’s response in this poem?

## Sharon's Christmas Prayer

John Shea

She was five, sure of the facts,  
and recited them with slow solemnity,  
convinced every word was revelation.

She said  
they were so poor  
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat  
and they went a long way from home  
without getting lost.

The lady rode a donkey, the man walked,  
and the baby was inside the lady.

They had to stay in a stable  
with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)  
but Three Rich Men found them  
because a star lited the roof.

Shepherds came and you could  
pet the sheep but not feed them.  
Then the baby was borned.  
And do you know who he was?

Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars.

The baby was God.

And she jumped in the air,  
whirled round, dove into the sofa,  
and buried her head under the cushion,  
which is the only proper response  
to the Good News of the Incarnation.

Do we feel anything close to that kind of excitement about Jesus' birth? We have to begin to see reality in a new way. May this Eucharist continue the transformation of our hearts.