

The Guest List

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Christmas Eve
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What a blessing it is to see all of you here as we celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus! On this holy night our hearts and imaginations are drawn back in time as we hear the Nativity story. We see that event through the lens of our Christian heritage and all eyes are focused on the stable in Bethlehem. Yet we recall from Luke's gospel that many other things were happening on the first Christmas. It was a busy time, and not just in Bethlehem. The first century world that welcomed the Baby Jesus was full of aggression and unrest. When I think about the night that this baby was born, I imagine scenes like these:

In the great city of Rome, the Emperor Augustus sat down to dinner with the members of his court. The emperor was so powerful that his name had been changed from Octavian to Augustus, which means the "exalted one." His guest list was very select and his invitations were used to consolidate his power. Only the empire's finest were admitted to his dining chambers. The guests reclined on couches and ate delicious foods. As they enjoyed the feast and the entertainment, they thought about their good fortune. How fabulous it was to be on the emperor's guest list!

Next we move across the Mediterranean to one of Rome's occupied territories in the Middle East. King Herod was the local dictator who resided in a fine palace and he, too, was enjoying a feast. The guest list at this banquet was also very select, but these people were nervous. The brutal Herod was known to execute people who displeased him, including members of his own family. So Herod's guests dined well but they often looked over their shoulders.

On the same night throughout Palestine, there was gridlock on the roads due to the government census. Everyone was ordered to enroll in their hometown so the highways were clogged and the inns were full. The crime rate went up as the crowds grew. The local bosses finally closed their doors to the hordes of travelers who filled their streets. They sat down to a hearty dinner with a select group of friends, and soon they were buying and selling favors.

Meanwhile, there were people who were not on anyone's guest list and never had dinner at all that night. A young couple in childbirth did not have time for a meal as they delivered their baby boy in a stable, far away from home. And in that region there were shepherds in the fields who were never invited to dinner parties. This was probably due to their status as thieves and low life. These fellows were just digging into their brown bag suppers when a flock of angels appeared. The shepherds were terrified. They immediately thought about those stray sheep they had just picked up from somebody else's flock. But it turns out that the angels were not there for investigation. They brought an invitation, the first invitation that the shepherds had received in a very long time.

Come and see the Messiah, the angels sang. Come and see a baby wrapped like all other babies, tucked into a food trough in the barn. Come to Bethlehem and see: this is good news! You are invited; you are at the top of the list!

So, the shepherds pulled themselves together and straightened their robes and headed towards Bethlehem. You know the rest of the story.

On the first Christmas, wealth and power swirled throughout the Roman Empire. Deals were cut, troops were moved, uprisings were squelched, and cities were bought and sold. The emperor's court and Herod's guests feasted high above the communities they ruled. They sent out decrees and let others deal with the consequences.

But that's not the story we proclaim here. It is not the story that lasted. All that power would be gone in a few generations. The enduring power, God's power, was with those who were not on the guest list and not even on the radar screens of the people who ruled. The guests in the story that we celebrate tonight were shepherds and barnyard animals. And while decrees and orders were shouted around the world, these guests of the Christchild heard the angels' song.

On Christmas Eve 2006, orders and decrees continue to fly across the world. Even now, decisions are being made in the corridors of power and in streets and alleys around the globe. Governments convene and laws are enforced. Rulers of nations are feasting and making deals in exchange for wealth and information. Guerilla warriors perch high in the mountains armed with weapons and laptop computers as they plan Armageddon. Human beings continue to be bought and sold. War rages in the Middle East and North Africa tonight. Mary and Joseph and their children must take to the road again. The refugee camps are full, the prisons are full, and the hospitals are full. We look to the Nations' capitol, the state's capitol, the boardroom, the mayor's office, and the principal's office. We look to all those places where someone is in charge. We hope for a plan, for a decree that can change the world. But on this night, this holy night of the year, we stop hear the angel voices. They sing out to us, "*Glory to God....Peace on Earth.*"

On Christmas in the 21st century, we are surprised to realize once again that God works beyond our ideas of what is important. It is stunning to think that the Creator of the universe calls creation into relationship through the birth of a child. Here comes God's own son, an extension of the Divine in a little human being, put down in the middle of the census crowds. And it is this child in his common surroundings that changed the world. The emperor and his court are long gone and forgotten. It is the child and his unorthodox guests that we cherish tonight.

The guest list of the baby at the stable did not change much when Jesus grew up. He was always criticized for his choice of friends and his dining companions. Some said that they were not acceptable. They were not good enough and they were not holy enough in the eyes of the world. These men and women became disciples of Jesus in the first century anyway and they founded the Christian Church. We can all take heart tonight that our roots in the church go all the way back to the most unlikely people in the community.

On the night of his birth and throughout his life, Jesus touched the ones in the crowd that needed him, even those whom others never suspected. So, if you sometimes feel out of place in church, you fit right in here. And if you have doubts or feel unworthy of God's love, or if you wish you could be different, you have come to the right place tonight. The community around Jesus has always been made up of surprising people who long for more.

Tonight we marvel that everyone is on God's guest list. We are invited into the mystery of God's generosity and hospitality in the birth of Jesus. We have not come to the ruins of the emperor's court. God has invited us into the stable, into the living, breathing human community. It is here that we find Jesus. It is here that the angels sing.

And so tonight, I bid you welcome! Welcome to the stable, welcome to God's table. Find your place here and join the feast, along with all the rest of us. We are always on the guest list, a list that stretches over the centuries and is never full. On Christmas, Jesus Christ is born and lives in the middle of our life, with all of its frayed and messy edges. You will not find Jesus in the distant palace. He lives in the heat and heart of the human community. He goes with you through these doors and into the life of our city tonight.

So let us join the angel chorus and sing, *Glory to God in the highest...Peace on Earth... Peace on Earth...Good will to all God's people.* AMEN