

**Christmas Eve**  
**The Rev. Martha L. Hubbard**

**December 24, 2008**  
**St. Paul's, Newburyport, MA**

His name is Stephen, and on the snowy Christmas Eve, when he was 3 years old, he came into church in his mother's arms, and on his head he wore an enormous Santa hat. I feigned shock and said, "*Santa is that really you?*" He paused for a moment, then smiling big, lifted up his hat high above his head and said, "*No, it's just me, Stephen!*"

As I have contemplated Christmas each year since I have often come back to that moment and Stephen's words to me. His words communicate to me an abiding truth about Christmas. His statement, "*it's just me*" reminds me that no matter what we wear this time of year, underneath it all, we are just us.

Here we are again on Christmas Eve, with everything that we have gladly put on ourselves to celebrate with, and with everything that life has not necessarily so happily put on us since last Christmas, and underneath it all, it's just us. And the Christ child smiles and reaches out a hand to let us know that is just fine. To let us know that this grand celebration is not concerned with what lays overtop of us and our lives. Rather it is simply a celebration of God and us - together in this world.

And if we pay attention to the nativity Gospel from Luke, which we have read again tonight we see that this is true. But, we may wonder, "*Did it really happen that way?*" All one has to do is compare the four gospels to see that they do not agree about the details – Mark doesn't even talk about Christ's birth. For me, these nativity Gospels are not literal stories, yet they are deeply true.

Unfortunately both our holiday traditions and moguls of marketing have done their part to over gild the Christmas story. To make it shine, to make it sell. But if we lift back those layers and look at what is really written in this story from Luke we see that there is really nothing particularly gilded or glittery about it. In fact there we find more darkness than light. There is the darkness of a pregnant couple's failing search for shelter that results in a desperate birth in a cattle stable. There is the darkness of shepherds sleeping out in the cold vulnerability of open fields. Granted there is the light of the heavenly host breaking in on the shepherds, but it is sudden, unsettling and departs as quickly as it came, leaving the shepherds to grope in the darkness toward this mysterious event in Bethlehem.

So the stage set of this story is not highly decorated. Rather the backdrop poverty and darkness. This does not mean that our decorating with lights and all manner of things that glitter is wrong. But if this year we find ourselves without the resources to do so, the power of Christmas is not lessened. In fact it is strengthened. With fewer adornments, perhaps we are less distracted from the heart of the story - God did not dress up, God dressed down. Luke tells it this way -God chose to come in humble vulnerability, to be born into the reality of common people. God chose an out of the way and unobtrusive entry into the world because God did not want to leave anyone out. Luke remembered that through the prophet Isaiah God had spoken a promise that those walking in darkness would see a great light. So Luke tells that, the Creator of all things put on the vesture of a helpless child born in dark regions. In Luke's nativity story, desperation meets hope.

There is real power here. As so many in our region have experienced recently, when the electricity goes out, at night you can see by the moon and the stars. If the undulations of our world economy, or of your personal life, or of the decline of the health or death of someone you love or some other change or chance of life has dimmed or extinguished your

lights, this is your story tonight. This is a source of power waiting for you to plug in.

This story hums and glows with the truth that the externals of our life do not make us, and that even if we are fortunate enough to have everything we could want in life, inside each of us has an interior poverty. It is that emptiness that can only be filled by our Creator- a God shaped space. We need not fear it – though often we do, and so we try to find other things to fill it in. But we need not fear it. At least that is what this nativity gospel extols. In fact it paradoxically proclaims that we should seek our interior poverty, for it is there that Christmas truly comes. It is into the poverty of humanity, through the stripped down nakedness of a homeless child that God made the ultimate sacrifice for us. *“Do not be afraid!”* God says, *“It’s just me, your God, come to dwell among you, to touch you with human fingertips for healing, to teach with a human voice, and to die a death like yours so that the whole world might have life and have it more abundantly!”*

As God is born among us again, may we dare to spiritually lift whatever we have covered ourselves with and whatever life has shrouded us with – let us lift it all up over our heads and offer to God the only gift

necessary. Let us say to God, *"Look, it's just me."* And then let us listen for God's peals of joyous laughter.

When we give ourselves to God, just as we are, and allow God to fill our interior poverty, we are transformed. We become God's hands and feet. We become God's voice, God's smile, God's healing fingertips. We become a way by which God reaches out to the desperate needs of our world. Through us God makes Christmas in the world, all year long. May it be so!

Blessed Christmas to one and all.

In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen+