

# Christmas Eve

## *Call to Worship*

Come in my friends, and welcome home.

Outside it's cold, and dark. Those things are lovely. They call from us a drawing inward, a tightness of body, a measured conserving of heat and energy.

These things serve their purpose in their time

Just now, though, it's warm inside. The tree lights are on, candles about to be lit, and perhaps it's time to relax.

Let go, just for now. You are among friends. You are not alone. Here, you are at home.

You know how it is when you bring a frozen tree into the house, and it sits in the warmth of your home and slowly lets down its branches? Perhaps this can be place where you can let down your branches.

You may still have a whole list of things to do: and you'll have to assume control once more when you leave

but here – here you can let go. You don't have to do anything right now but breathe. Just sit there. Sing if you want to, listen if you want to, pray if you are moved to do so. Just sit if that is what you need. You are home.

There are so many questions and concerns I know that. There may be fears, some heartache, grief or anger mixed in with whatever else you've carried here heavy in your soul. I invite you to put down that burden for a moment. Hang it on the point of the star...let the angels carry it for you just for now. If you need to pick it up again when you leave, then by all means do that

but just now, lay it down. Let it go. Practice what it might be like not to carry the pain.

As the candles burn, we become like them; as the light shines, we soften, and open to the imprint of the holy in our midst. And we become open, at least to the possibility that the star still shines and the angels singing even now.

We will tell the story once again. Or we will relax and let the story tell itself, and let the prayers that are being prayed in us rise to the surface. As the story unfolds, so do the wings of the angels, so do the branches of the once frozen tree, and along with the candle wax, this place is fairly dripping with the holy. With glory, with wonder.

Welcome home.

# Christmas Eve Monologue 2011

## *Letting Go*

I greet you in the name of the Holy One. Blessed be that name! Mystery, and Mover of the stars, right here among us, and that to bless;

The shimmering flame at the centre of creation and of your own imperfect and glorious flesh. Ground of our being, Alpha and Omega – God with us, Emmanuel!

I've come to you tonight across the centuries; and I thank the Holy One, who takes the straight yarn of time and knits of it a garment, folding the line of time in on itself, and out again, knit perl, knit, perl....until we are crafted together across time and space, to warm and protect the here and now.

My name is Rachael. I live in Nazareth, have all my life. And I want to tell you my story. Well, part of it anyway – stories are funny that way. You never really know the whole thing, do you? You want to contain them but they wiggle out of our grasp and begin to tell themselves. Stories, the real ones, just don't sit still. So I'll tell you what I can of my own, before it jumps up again to play in the sandbox that is this world of ours.

Joseph – that dear man – Joseph would like what I just said about stories: how they can't be controlled. I can see him now; eyes sparkling and the corner of his mouth turned up – the closest he ever came to laughter. He was a quiet man; someone for whom the inner world was the real one – do you know what I mean? Controlled. Control was the hinge upon which that man's early life swung; and it was a rusty hinge, to be sure.

Joseph – I have a real soft spot for him, as you can tell. I know him as I do, because he and my own son Daniel (may he rest in peace), were friends. They grew up together, and as a boy, Joseph spent more time at our house than his own. His parents were fish merchants, not wealthy, but well enough off. I never understood it, but he and his father....they loved each other, don't misunderstand, but...well...Joseph just preferred to be with us. I never pressed him and he didn't talk about it. Perhaps I should have encouraged him to go home more; perhaps I should have asked him to talk with me...I don't know now. It's not good to play that game "I should have" - do you do that? I should have – I should have -

like a story, or a life, you have to let it go and let it be what it is and find its own way in the world

Still, though, I wonder.

Anyway, Joseph and Daniel were as close as friends can be. They played together when they were little, playing soldier, mimicking the voices and boots of the Romans they saw in our town. Later, as they grew to understand who the Romans were and what they were doing to our people – then

they were both outraged, as only young people can be. They were going to join the rebels, train for war in caves in the desert plotting insurrection to bring down the mighty from their thrones and lift up those of low degree. Usher in the age of peace that the prophets foretold. They both loved to work with wood and had become quite good at it – but in their zealot anger, they'd say “I'll take this hammer to the skull of the next Roman who violates one of our women, I WILL!”

I was both proud, and terrified. We all wanted that time to come...we were all waiting for Messiah, and the age of peace on earth – but surely you don't bring it about that way? I'd sit them both down, watch them devour most of the day's bread as a snack (YOUNG people!!) and we'd talk.

“The Romans loot and starve our people with their taxes”, they'd say. “Someone has to stop them!”.

“But Daniel” I'd say, “You too Joseph – to oppose them with violence is turning into what they are. This cannot be the way Messiah comes”

“We need to be in control of our own country” Joseph said. “When Messiah comes, I want him to know I did everything I could to prepare his way”

But I knew and so did they, what the Romans do to rebels when they are caught. We had all seen the fields of prisoners nailed to crosses – it was enough to discourage most potential Roman enemies. All but a few – including these 2 boys who believed with a passion and naiveté of youth that they were in control, and that it would never happen to THEM.

Two things happened to change the course of their lives. First, my sister's husband died, and we sent Daniel away to be with her. Help look after the farm. And if I am being honest, we sent him away stop the flow of the energy that seemed to be increasingly violent among them and their friends. Joseph understood why we did that, and I'm not sure he ever forgave us for sending Daniel away. Not until...but that came later.

The second thing is that Joseph met Mary. He was ...enchanted. Although you'd never know it, unless you knew him as well as I. And he set about with all the energy he had once spent on dreams of swords and vengeance...turned that into a passion for winning her heart. And more than that, convincing her father that he was a worthy suitor.

Quietly, intensely, he won them both. When the engagement was announced, I've never seen him so happy. He began working hard with his parents in their business, and then on his own time, building a home for his future with Mary. I can see him still, bent over at the lathe after the day's work was done. Measuring. Measuring again. Controlling the movement of the saw. Precise. Certain. Controlled. Measured. As you must be in wood work. It came to him naturally. But he was as happy as I had seen him, even though he still didn't speak to us for sending Daniel away. He couldn't let that go. But, that aside, he seemed happy.

When the news went around town about Mary, nobody could believe it.

Can I confess something to you?

When our son Daniel was killed....

I didn't tell you that part, did I? He did NOT, as it turned out, stay out of the way of the Romans. With his young brave idealistic misguided heart, he joined some rebels, they were caught, and let me just say I have a bone to pick with the Almighty who has no idea what it is like to see your son die on a Roman cross...

I'm sorry. Someday I need to learn to let that go. I thought I had. Apparently not.

What I started to tell you is that after - *after*, some of Daniel's things were returned to us, and among them, some letters to him from Joseph. I read them. I feel ashamed for that, but truth be told, I'm glad as well.

He wrote about finding out that Mary was with child.

*"All my careful plans Daniel....I had planned our future as carefully as I had measured each board for our home. I thought I had it all mapped out – you know how I like to have control of myself, of my life – and now this. The story she tells is unbelievable in the extreme – and yet – I don't know. I want to believe her. I feel lost. I have no feeling for the grain of my soul – no sense of which way is crosswise – there's a ragged gaping hole in me where once I housed a comfortable certainty and now...I just don't know."*

At that time I had no idea what was happening in his heart...I was watching from the distance he kept between us. His body was tight and straight, as though he could contain and control his life's circumstances holding them between his shoulder blades. I longed to reach out and hold him.

The gossip was cruel, and vicious, and we prepared ourselves for Mary's return from her cousin's home and the inevitable stoning. But then – more shocking news – they were to be married! In spite of it all, they were to marry.

Was Joseph the father of her baby, or was he not? Either way – this was shameful, a dishonouring of both families – it was simply not done. He lost his place in the family, and in its business....Joseph paid a heavy price for that decision. He lost his family and his way of making a living. I hope you know that.

Eventually he turned his hobby of wood work into a small business to make a living for himself and for his new family. He had lost so much, but he was more at peace and rested than I'd ever seen him. Only in reading his letters did I know at least part of what had happened. He had talked a lot to my son about not being able to sleep,

*"It was astonishing, Daniel – after weeks of sleeplessness (you know I've never been a good sleeper anyway, but it got worse as I tried to decide what to do. It's so unlike me not to be able to measure up a situation and make the decision that makes the most sense) – I'd lie awake thinking and thinking, and nothing helped.*

*Then – in an instant, it seemed....I just said to myself "let it go. Let the Almighty take this burden, even if only for this night" - and I slept! I slept! It was not a surrender, no not that. It was....like reaching out and*

*claiming a gift that I had longed for and had been right there all along. Sleep. The blessedness of it, Daniel, delicious like a pomegranate in winter, is sleep. To lie back beneath the sky, and simply let go.....let myself go to wherever the Almighty takes me in the night. Trusting – TRUSTING, Daniel that makes me laugh even now. Trusting that nothing will hurt me while I am so vulnerable, that my soul will be returned to me in the morning and that were I to leap into the unknown, that the earth will catch me, and something beneath will catch the whirling earth. I could sleep!”*

He became – how shall I say – more fluid, more porous - and deep - and open to the dreams that occupy human silence. And when the angel came, as angels do, he was ready. The moment was large...and the soft, forgiving darkness he had feared, enveloped him and with the fierce swollen joy of a creation nearing its birthtime, brought forth from him the poet's song. He let go – and the angel spoke.

And what the angel told him, in the end, was his own story – the one he had all but forgotten, that lay coiled inside him; wound round his very bones – the dream he hadn't allowed himself to sleep deeply enough to dream. The story of his own goodness; his own creation in the image of the Creator – and how in the end that image is enfleshed in human kindness and compassion in the face of need. The story of his part in a great and mighty plan that even now was being birthed into the world.

He awoke, and stood on feet that too long had walked too carefully; chosen only the trusted path. He took a step into the void....and another...

He sought out Mary. She came to the door, eyes downcast, bracing herself for the blow she knew would come. Something in his voice, though, caused her to look up. He took a deep breath – more air in his lungs than he'd taken in his life. He began to speak; his voice croaked, the register of compassion unused, these many long days. He tried again. “I thought I could be sure of what to do. I thought I could discover the full truth and that would lead me to make the right choice. Mary...I don't know the RIGHT thing to do, but I know this: it's better to be kind than correct, and somehow, somehow -we are being shown the face of God in a new way.” And then - not as an afterthought but more like words he had held so long he wanted to savour speaking them...

“and most of all....I love you Mary”

Joseph grew in his letting go. Melted into life and its uncertainties the way...you know when you in the north bring a frozen tree into the warmth of your home, and it slowly lets down its branches, and is all the more beautiful for that? He was like that tree.

He came to me after their trip to Bethlehem – brought Mary and that lovely boy to meet me; talked to me in a warm voice laced with wonder about the moment of the birth – his own feelings of complete inadequacy as she laboured...his sense of being able to do nothing but stand by and stroke her face...the kindness of the shepherds who, used to birthing lambs, had offered their assistance....his wonder and awe at the final push, the sound of her pain, and then the cry of the child....

He said that the moment he reached out to that miracle child, stroked his little face wet with the stuff of creation, the little fist closed around his callused carpenter's finger, and he was sure. He had found the

grain of his soul at last. And as the child held his finger and he encircled them both in his arms, he said to himself "THIS is worth hanging on to. THIS I will never let go"

Life goes on, doesn't it – and it did for them as well. Angels' song gave way to the clank and rattle of ordinary life (although sometimes they are one and the same). They returned to us in Nazareth. Would Joseph maintain the new life he found? He did. Bless his heart – he did.

He worked hard at letting things go; tried to make up with his parents, let go of the ways that town had turned on him in his shame, then, the powers of fear and insanity that forced them to Egypt....he did what he could, let the rest go, and simply lived his life – father, husband, and carpenter.

When word came to us that Daniel had been arrested, it was Joseph to whom I turned - and it was Joseph who travelled to Jerusalem to speak to him once more and to see if something could be done. Of course there was nothing, and Daniel was crucified. Joseph came back shaken – he wept openly in my arms and talked about being there for Daniel until the end.

"I hope I never have to face another crucifixion" he said.

And you know – he never did.

He died when Jesus was still growing into himself.

And at the end, it seems right that it was Jesus who held him

stroking his face. In a gesture born of a holy, universal instinct, Joseph's fist closed around Jesus' calused carpenter's finger..

and the last thing he heard on this earth was not the voice of the angel, but the son of his open heart, saying: "It's ok Dad – just let go"

I don't know where Joseph's story touches your own; I don't know what you might let go of and sleep better; I don't know what angels you would hear without the clanging of the doors where you try to lock up the movement of the spirit.

I do know that this is more than a story. I know that this night the gauzy membrane separating us from the singing of angels has been torn, and something new has been born – and this is a glimpse of the very face of God. God who did not use power nor control nor magic to move this world along

but chose to let go

to let go

of power

not regarding equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied of power, taking the form of a servant, was humbled and came among us as the most vulnerable of creatures....

this is astounding, astonishing –

This is something to hang on to.

May you look to the skies

to one another

to the mirror

and to the most vulnerable and needy

and see there the face of God.

Merry, merry Christmas.

*( Commissioning and Benediction )*

Amen – let it be so. Christ is born again into the world and once more God has said yes to this broken fragile world.

This night's blessings abound. The candles are dripping wax and the air is dripping with glory.

Let heaven and nature sing