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Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 9: 2 – 7

Ps. 96

Titus 2: 11 - 14

Luke 2: 1 – 14, (15 – 20)

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“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant!” Oh! Shalom! Slih’a – excuse me, I didn’t mean to disturb you. Was I singing out loud? Oh, my. Normally I wouldn’t do such a thing! But tonight – well, tonight a lot of things are different. The fact is, I’m usually pretty invisible to people; they pay no attention to me. I’m just a ‘pitiful beggar, threadbare and homeless.’ So, no one really sees me. Or wants to see me. Not as a person. Not as a woman. Not as someone with a name and a face and a story.

It hasn’t always been this way. I do have a name. It’s Miriam. It is a good name and many Jewish girls are named this. It goes way back in my people’s history to the older sister of Moses – the one who watched over him in the basket in the bulrushes until Pharaoh’s daughter pulled him out, the one who danced and sang when my people were safely on the other side of the Red Sea. But it goes back even farther than that. It is probably an Egyptian name that means “beloved.” And I have been beloved.

You see, my parents, who named me Miriam, loved me very much. My mother delighted in teaching me the ways of the Lord and David’s psalms as I was growing up. She delighted in having me work with her in the garden and in the cooking. My father, too, sang to me in the evenings and told me stories, and he loved the special dishes that I would prepare for him. I was the only child that my parents had who survived beyond childhood, and so I was very special, very beloved. All too soon I lost my mother and father, but not before I met a young man who also treasured me. Had he not, my father would never have arranged for me to marry him! His name was Asher, which means “happy” or “blessed” – and we were! But for such a short time before he became sick and died. So, suddenly, I had no one – not parents or husband or child - and nothing. I know what it feels like to be beloved. I know, too, what I have been missing.

This is how I ended up begging, trying to get by. I do not have anyone – a father or a husband or even a brother – to support me, and I will not sell myself. So, I try to work in the fields when I can. I try to help in the kitchens or gardens of the richer people. But most of the time, people see me in a corner of the market trying to beg, or going through the rubbish pile on the edge of the city, to see if there is anything I can use. I sleep in the caves outside the city or in an empty stall in someone’s stable. It’s sometimes very cold, and it isn’t very safe, but it’s how I came to be in the midst of something so wonderful this very night.

It was well after the sun had gone down, well after most people had gone home and gone to sleep. I was making my rounds to see where I could sleep this night. The city is very full right now. Rome’s census has everyone scurrying to the city where their family is from, and so this, being the City of David, Bethlehem, is overflowing with those who are from King David’s lineage. I’m afraid that I am from the lineage of his servants, but Bethlehem is still my home, so I did not need to travel. And besides, I don’t think I would be counted anyway.

There are a few public inns here. After all, Bethlehem is just a little bit south of Jerusalem on a major trade route, so foreign merchants come through here regularly. Right now, these inns are crowded with people here for the census who don’t have family to stay with. So they sleep on the floor

in these inns with everyone else. Those who have come who still have family here, no matter how distantly they are related, try to stay in private guest rooms in their family home. But, because there are so many people here, even all of those must be full. Which is why, as I was headed down a back lane to a stable that sometimes has some empty space, I came across this young couple in it.

They had apparently arrived a few days ago and had settled into whatever space wasn't occupied by animals with what few belongings they had with them. The man looked nervous and excited and tired all at the same time. The woman looked exhausted, and then I saw the reason why. Nestled into the crook of her arm was the wee-est little baby, all wrapped up in bands of cloth. The swaddling helps calm the child, as well as keeps them warmer in the cold night air.

So focused on this child were they, that they didn't hear or see me approaching until I was nearly upon them. And then, they both looked up at me, not so much in surprise as with tears of joy streaming down both their faces. The midwife must have already come and gone, unless the father had delivered the child, but that isn't very likely.

There is a little stab of pain inside when I see a baby and know that I will probably not ever have one, but then there is also this overwhelming joy for the affirmation of life that a baby represents, and the joy wins out. As a person on the streets, I don't often get to hold a baby. Others see me as dirty or suspicious and so they don't let me near their children. But tonight was different – after all, the parents are people of the street right now, too, and they didn't seem to be afraid of me being there. In fact, they even invited me to come and see their child, and so, I came and knelt on the straw near the woman.

In the light streaming down from the full moon and the stars, it was just the three of us and this tiny bundle. And some assorted cows and donkeys and horses looking on, quietly lowing, braying, nickering and stomping their feet. If I didn't know better, I'd say the animals were as excited and joyful about this new addition as the father and mother!

Perhaps it was the look of yearning on my face, but the mother offered to let me hold her precious child! "A boy," she said quietly, carefully placing the little bundle into my outstretched arms. "His name is Jesus," said the man, softly, tenderly. The baby's eyes fluttered open and his tiny little mouth formed a perfect circle as he yawned. The deep pools of dark brown that were his eyes looked into mine, and – well, I know that he had only been in the world a short time – but I felt as if he somehow knew me, really *knew* me and, as crazy as it sounds, I felt loved, I felt beloved, for the first time in such a long time. Just with the way those eyes looked into mine. How can such a wee baby do that? It was probably all my imagination, but it didn't *feel* like my imagination.

As I held him, I heard myself making all those silly noises that people do with babies. Perhaps because what we experience in those moments is so far beyond regular words. As much as I would have loved continuing to hold him, he seemed to be hungry, so I handed him back to his mother. She shifted a little as she began to nurse him and patted the ground for me to sit down. So, I did. And we began to quietly introduce ourselves. I told them my name is Miriam, and the mother smiled, and said that it was her name, too! Well, actually it was Mary, but Mary is another way of saying Miriam. So, in addition to both being on the street this night, we have that in common. Her husband's name is Joseph, and he is directly descended from David, which is what brought them to Bethlehem at this difficult time for them. They had traveled all the way from Galilee. I've never been more than a few miles from Bethlehem. I

can't imagine traveling that far. I especially can't imagine being so very great with child and traveling that far.

As I sat there and we talked, they began to tell me the strange happenings that had preceded this child's birth. Mary told me of the angel's visit and then Joseph told me about *his* angel's visit and his dreams, just like our ancestor Joseph's dreams. Mary told me about going to see her relative, Elizabeth – Elizabeth! The one who had been barren for all her child-bearing years and was now too old to conceive, but who was six months pregnant! Mary told me how Elizabeth had greeted her and, as she did, how excited the baby in her got at the arrival of Mary who was already with child. Then Mary shared with me the song that had just seemed to burst out of her with the joy that she had been holding in until that very moment. It was the song that you heard me singing just now. It was all so amazing and wonderful, and I didn't really know what to make of it.

Just as they were finishing telling me all of this, we could hear some people approaching. We looked up to see several rough-looking (who am I to talk?) men and women. One of them had a lamb around his shoulders, so I thought they must be shepherds in from the fields. But what would they be doing here and leaving their flocks untended?

When they saw the stable, and then Mary and Joseph and the baby, Jesus, they started slapping each other on the back, and laughing, and their eyes just grew wider with both delight and satisfaction. Mary and Joseph invited them to come in as well. So, though it was a bit crowded in the stable, everyone gathered around this little family. The shepherds all started making those same senseless cooing, babbling sounds that I had been making, as they were just undone by this child. Then, they looked deep into the faces of the mother and father, and then at each other, as if to make sure of something before they began to speak.

What these shepherds fresh from the fields said next was every bit as amazing as what Mary and Joseph had told me. They, too, had an angel story, or rather, a story with a lot of angels! They told about the announcement that God has acted this night, and they told about the glorious light and the stars and the music and the whole host of angels. And they told how *they* had been told where to find this child. And lo and behold, here that child was.

Imagine. Me. Being a witness to all of this! Like a fly on the wall to something so amazingly wonderful that God has done this night. Right here. In front of me. And don't you wonder about God, working through this young couple, a couple of nobodies, really, not so different from me, from the hills of Galilee of all places. And then to have shepherds be the first ones to know! Shepherds, of all people! And to be out here with animals and hay. Not a prince in a palace. Not a king in a castle. But this baby in a barn. Why would God do that?? Why *has* God done this?? Why has God shown such favor on people who are so unimportant to what the world thinks and does?

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant! Somehow, Mary's words are *my* words this night. They speak to my heart and, at the same time, they are the words that my heart speaks! Who am I that God should be mindful of bringing *me* such joy? Such love? In Mary's song, so like that of our ancestor Hannah, she sings about God scattering the proud in their conceit. About casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. Lifting up people like Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, and me. And maybe you. She sings about God filling up the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.

I know that God has done something amazing this night. I have seen it and I have heard it. And I have held it! God has done it for me. And for you. And for the whole world. Jesus. His name means "God saves." I think that is what has begun tonight. All of us are beggars in some way or another, it's just that some of us are more aware of it than others. And tonight, God has come to satisfy our hunger. To fill us with good things. God has come to save us. Who would have thought that God could look like a tiny child, wrapped in rags and lying in straw? Who would have thought that God could look, well, a lot like me? Rejoice! For God is here. Our salvation is at hand! God's peace be with you on this most holy night! Shalom!

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