This evening we had a Christmas pageant. Mary and Joseph were there, and a beautiful and energetic baby Jesus named Angus. There were sheep and shepherds, foreign kings bearing gifts, dancing angels and a staff-pounding King Herod. The reenactment of Luke’s nativity was just a joyous thing to behold and the best example of absolute perfection hidden within the lovely gift of absolutely good enough.

Good enough. I have come to truly appreciate that notion of good enough in my life as I grow older. It is the realization, the knowledge that we are, as children of the loving God, imperfectly perfect in our Creator’s eyes. When we look at the nativity story we have abundant examples of this.

The shepherds were outsiders. They lived out of the community, up in the hill country. They were poor people, they lived rough lives, and to most people they were an afterthought at best. The mutton roasted in the kitchen, the wool arrived at the weavers, but little concern was given to the source of this abundance.

I picture these scruffy men, sitting around a fire on just another evening. Seeking to stay warm, ever alert for predators, listening for restless sheep that might wander away into danger. How surprising, how terrifying it must have been for them when from out of the quiet night comes a blazing light and a messenger declaring, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all people. A child has been born, the Messiah.”

I wonder, where they waiting for this? Was the news of a Messiah good news for these people on the outskirts of society? Were they ready for a miracle? They were not strangers to wonder. All those nights out in the wide-open starry sky. Did they wonder about what was out there in the blackness pierced with bright moments of light? The night sky was not changeless to them. They knew the movement of the sky above. Saw planets and comets move about.

Maybe the angel appeared to them **precisely because** they were ready to hear the good news. Perhaps they were **the** imperfectly perfect people, ready to receive God’s gift of abundance and to follow. Perhaps shepherds, in their hard-lived lives, apart from the rest of community, with their necessary and holistic connection to the earth and sky, surrounded by the wonders and dangers of wildness, and their necessary alertness to what is around them, …..perhaps they were more ready than anyone else to encounter the heavenly host, to really hear the message of joy and hope of Immanuel, God with us.

I have to imagine that even as the shepherds follow the angel’s bidding to go to the child, that they kept talking to each other, trying to explain the unexplainable. It’s only human. It is natural to want to understand something so significant, even as we today continue to try in our own imperfect way to make sense of this wonder and what might mean for us.

The angel pulled these people from the margins to the very center of the universe on that night. Angels will do that. Mary and Joseph, are acquainted with them as wel, as they are also pulled into God’s plan of inexplicable mystery.

This peasant couple, who have traveled far, about 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, in obedience to a decree of the Roman Empire, are now housed in the only place they could find shelter, a humble lowly dwelling for cattle. And their first-born child has arrived and is sleeping in the feeding troth, cushioned by the hay gleaned from off of the floor. And into the barn come these scraggly, and probably a little scary tenders of sheep telling of angelic proclamations and wonders in the sky that have called them to this imperfectly perfect birthplace.

In the midst of all this Mary pondered all that she was experiencing, that her family was experiencing. Yes, she knows what the angel has told her. That this child is God’s Son, the Messiah. One of my favorite hymns is a lively version of the Magnificat that ends with the chorus, *“My heart shall sing of the day you bring, let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.”*

The world **is** about to turn. I can’t help but wonder just what is in Mary’s head at these moments. What does this turning mean? Certainly Mary would have heard the reading of the scripture about the promise of the Messiah. She may have believed the Savior would come. But now she is realizing that those promises are fulfilled in her. If those parts of the scripture were now confirmed, how much more of the scripture she knew must have totally new meaning? It was not just tradition and religion, but now it was real! Jesus was REAL!

I also think she certainly pondered on what the future of Jesus would hold. She knew that His life would be much different than any of the other children she knew. How would this knowledge change their lives, other lives? What would God do with Him? What exactly would become of her son?

Luke tells us twice in the second chapter, first in the lowly cattle shed and again in the temple where a young Jesus was found listening and questioning temple teachers, that Mary held close what was going on around her, that she treasured these things and pondered them in her heart.

It is often said that the space measured from head to heart is the longest distance we must travel in our faith journey. That word pondered is very important. The original Greek language of the New Testament used the word *symballo*, meaning to throw things together, to encounter. It is also where we derive our word symbol. Symbols are things that represent other things, that draw our minds and hearts toward something, things often at the very edge of our gaze. Symbols make the invisible more visible to us, the indescribable, more accessible for us, the mysterious, a bit more present in our lives.

If this sounds a bit like what we know as sacrament, what we define as the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, I don’t believe that is by mistake. In our imperfect attempts to understand the way that God is turning our world around in the joining of the Eternal Divine with the fragile nature of humanness, perhaps we might look to Mary, young mother for where we are to find the truth. The perfect truth which God has implanted deep within our hearts. And as the shepherds in the field, we might look, with new eyes, toward a spectacular display of glory in the starry sky that propel us on to find the one that sends our hearts burning toward justice.

Pondering is not a passive thing. If we are to follow the example of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, we will not mistake armchair ponderings for genuine sacramentality. We will expectantly take to heart the turning of the world, living into our imperfectly perfect understanding as God’s children in the miracle of this blessed Incarnation.

On Friday evening this week, Dec 21st, the longest night of the year, members of the community joined in Memorial Service to commemorate the lives of those lost in this past year as a result of lack of adequate shelter. The names of those people, some with first names only, others with a bit of a biographical story associated with them, were read out loud.

As we stood in the rain, a young woman stood next to me as we shared an umbrella. She was quiet as she payed close attention to the ceremony. I later found out that she and her family, mother, father and 5 children here in Peterborough were served an eviction notice on that day. The eviction was not due to unpaid rent, or damages to property, or any fault of their own. Lead was found in the apartment and two of the youngest children were found to have levels of poisoning that are critical. The landlord is unable or unwilling to remove the poison from the apartment and despite the family searching, there is no available and affordable housing in this region for them at this time.

Their story is not unusual, and it is one we must know as potentially our own. Many in our communities are one incident away from being without – housing, food, healthcare. The voices of the angelic host may very well be found in the stories we must listen to and to which we are called to respond.

In this Christmas moment, a moment of new birth, let us go out to embody Christ in this world of ours, as wonderful counselors to each other, listening deeply, with hearts as well as ears. Let us be willing people of hope pondering our own new birth with each encounter. Let us go out as princes and princesses of peace, searching for moments of compromise and hearts tuned to voices just outside of our direct hearing. Let us ponder the power of love, a Divine Love that comes to us in our own humanness, and reveals this miracle of Incarnation, over and over to us in each breath and every heartbeat.

Perhaps you are thinking that you are not ready enough for this perfect gift, that you are not shiny enough, faithful enough, healthy enough, loving enough, patient enough, fill-in-the-blank enough….The good news is that God is born to us this day, no strings attached. God so loved the world that he gave Jesus to us, to live with us, not only then, 2000 years ago, but today in this place, in your heart. God placed Godself in our arms, just as God thrusts us into each other’s embrace.

Ponder this perfect gift in your imperfectly perfect hearts tonight.

Tidings of Comfort and Joy to you. Merry Christmas.