

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on the Eve of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, 2011. To God be the glory.

My friend Adam is the new rector at the Church of the Holy Comforter in Burlington, North Carolina. Until he and his wife, who is also a priest, moved south several months ago, Adam was the assistant at Christ Church in Andover. Last spring, before Holy Comforter issued the call, Adam had to interview with the assisting bishop there in North Carolina whose name is Bishop Marble. Bishop Marble used to be the bishop of Mississippi, and he's had his share of fried chicken and cheese grits. My guess is that he's no an ounce under 300 pounds. Bishop Marble had never met Adam, but they got settled quickly into the office, and the first thing Bishop Marble said was, "Now, Adam, tell me a story. That's such a big question, isn't it? But go on now tell me a story."

Adam can imitate anybody so to hear him tell it is nearly to fall over with laughter. If priesthood doesn't work I'm sure things would work out for him in comedy.

I like those words from Bishop Marble: tell me a story. Tonight is a night for stories, and not just any story, but the story.

As a young child I used to spend the night across the street, at Kathy & Doug's, a young couple who helped to rear me. The only children's story book at their house was *The Night Before Christmas*, and even after I was too old for a picture book in rhyming verse, I liked them to read it to me. It was predictable and known, and having it read--at anytime of the year--was familiar and welcomed.

Tonight's story is similarly familiar and welcomed. It's a simple story about human life at its most human. A man and a young woman--she is heavily pregnant--travel from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town the man is from, to be registered in a census. It's a long and difficult journey; mostly he walks and she rides a donkey. If they find an inn at the end of the day, there's food and shelter. If not, they stop by the side of the road and sleep under the stars. When they reach Bethlehem the inn is already full, but the innkeeper allows them to sleep out back in the cattle shed. At least they'll be warm. During the night her labor pains come. The man helps, and their baby, a son, is born. Together they wrap him in the bands of clean cloth they've brought along, and after she nurses him, they cradle him and each other in their arms. Eventually they place him in a manger, a feed box, to sleep. That's one story.

We have others to tell, and you have stories too, from your own life, your own longing and fulfillment.

When our children ask us to tell them a story, they're seeking connection, wanting to be reminded of what's familiar and what's genuine. They're not interested in a fable that will calm them down so they can fall asleep; they're wanting a story. So do we on this night. We want a story upon which we can build our lives. That's what we do, after all, build relationships through our listening and speaking, and especially through the telling and hearing of our stories.

So when someone asks you tonight, or tomorrow, whether it's around the tree or at the table--if someone needs a story from you--how will you tell it? Will it include your relationship with this child whose birth we celebrate? How does his story intersect with yours? Tell that story of your belief, or of your questions and doubts, of your hopes and your fears. Go and tell it on the mountain, all of it, for Jesus Christ is born today.

A father called me yesterday morning. His son is in a 90 day treatment center. The family has been connected to the Epiphany community for a short while. We helped them when things were unspeakably hard, and he wanted me to know that they can see light at the end of the tunnel. He called to say "merry Christmas" and "thank you." Not to me so much as to you, and I bet if I had really pressed him he would have admitted that he was calling to say thank you to God. That's a story!

But you have one too. It's not the same as his, or mine, but yours has enormous power because it's caught up in the baby's story.

Jesus grew up to teach a way to live, and to live a way that was hope-filled, and to love in a way that was genuine. He showed others how to have courage, and about what life can be like. His story pointed in a direction of a better way, and so we celebrate his birth with everything we've got.

I don't know in any depth the story of the man who telephoned, or even his son's story. Sure, I know some bits and pieces, but the story is bigger than the chapters I've heard. What I do know is that his phone call revealed an interest, maybe even a longing, to connect here, to make meaning, and to discover hope.

The glory of tonight is not so much a story about God, but rather a story God tells us. It's not done through a pageant, it's not even told principally through wonderful liturgy and majestic music--it's told by God taking on human flesh. Sure, what we do with music and worship sweeps us into the awesomeness--it's supposed to do so--but tonight is ultimately God's yearning for us to see in ourselves God's own self.

So to the persons here tonight who are unemployed, God tells you a story that says because of Jesus's birth, life, death, and resurrection, God knows your anxiety and your despair; you're not alone. To the persons here tonight who are hurting or grieving, God tells you a story about how Christ makes love live forever. To the persons here tonight who have walked through these doors wanting to find joy--even if you're not sure it can come from organized religion--God tells you the story of how to prepare a room in your heart so your song is joined with heaven's and earth's.

Tell me a story. I know you have one, and I know that you can begin tonight--maybe in some sense for the first time ever--in some small way to find it and to tell it, perhaps when you hear someone say, "tell me a story." A happy and holy Christmas to you, my friends, and Amen.