

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since Linda is now retired she has gotten on all these email lists that send you jokes and cute pictures of animals. Some of these are really very nice. She forwarded this poem to me. It's entitled, "Against our better judgment."

We told her she couldn't go;
 she was too young
 to stay up that late.
She told us that
 Baby Jesus
 would be there
 and he was younger
 than she.

We told him he couldn't go;
 he was too old
 to brave the cold
 night air.
He told us he'd rather greet heaven from the Christmas Eve service
 than be found slumped by the TV

So we bundled them up against the extreme cold
 against their own defenselessness
 against our better judgment
 and they went out with joy.

My prayer is that those of us who think
 that we're in charge of the world and the church
 will remember that the stable
 was filled with such as these:
 those who could not be kept
 from rejoicing

We have a lot invested, both literally and figuratively, in believing we are in control of our lives. We have a lot invested in believing that we know what tomorrow will bring and we're ready for it, that we've prepared wisely for any eventuality, that we have a plan. Usually, when we find out that this isn't really true, that we aren't in control, it's because bad news comes, unannounced, unexpected, unplanned. And many of you have had that kind of bad news and know what I'm talking about.

But tonight, what I want to talk about is *Good* News that comes to us out of nowhere. This Good News is that God has come to dwell among us. God, the great and majestic God of our fathers and mothers, the God who parted the sea and reached out to rescue his people from slavery and who later redeemed them from exile, the God who took the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, this God became small so that we could know him in a new way. How small? Imagine a baby, as small as a bag of flour you could cradle in the crook of your elbow. It's ridiculous, really. Why would God take this risk? This God who had been so mighty and majestic and safe, why would God take this kind of a risk, to be held in the arms of a young, Jewish teenaged girl.

Every year I ask one of the young women from the confirmands to give the reading about Mary, because they are about the age that Mary would have been – this year it's Laura Owens. This year as I thought about listening to the reading, I had a new insight. I could imagine Mary, a little scared, hearing what would hardly have seemed like good news from the Angel Gabriel, that she had found favor and would bear a son, the son of the most high, who would reign over the house of Jacob forever. She is dubious, of course, who wouldn't be, but in the end, she says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." And we think about how brave she is, and it's true, she is brave and faithful.

And Joseph, poor Joseph. He's engaged to a girl who is pregnant, not by him, and by now he might be wondering whether he really was visited by an angel who told him this was all on the up and up, that it was a miracle. We are told that Bethlehem is Joseph's hometown and yet, where are his relatives and why wouldn't they take him in? Nonetheless, there he is, brave and faithful to Mary, standing by her, at the manger.

But the new insight is that it also struck me how brave God is to do this thing, to become a human, and not just that, but to enter life as the weakest and most dependent of humans, a baby.

In the carol, "Away in the manger," there is a line that goes, "the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes." And that's absolutely absurd. He's a baby, a half-hour old. Of course he cries. And his face is red and if you think Mary has had a hard time, what about poor Jesus? Being born must be enormously hard work. I'm glad I can't remember it. And here he is, lying in a manger. A manger that is probably made out of stone, probably pretty uncomfortable, even if it is lined with straw.

And then in troops a bunch of shepherds, who could sleep anyway? And they're telling a story about an angel who appeared to them – this is a story just filled with angels. And later on, we hear the stories of Anna and Simeon and of wise men from the east, all exceptional people, all coming to Jesus because they have heard some Good News.

What is this Good News? It is that God has taken an enormous risk. God has become small so that we can know him, know about his hopes for us, know about his love for us, first-hand. Who would have imagined it, that God would take this kind of a risk?

How did all these people respond, Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, Anna and Simeon and the wise men? They couldn't

help but rejoice. In spite of all the uncertainty of their lives, all the inconvenience and discomfort, they couldn't help but rejoice.

And neither can we. So we come out of our homes and into the cold, just to be together, to share again the Good News that we have heard, that our God has taken an enormous risk, an amazing gamble, that our God has come to us to live among us to teach us how to live with each other and with God.

I don't know that the people in this nave tonight are any better people than the people who didn't get to church. I don't know that we're more thoughtful or generous or faithful. I'd like to think so, but I know myself and my own failings. And I wonder if maybe we're here simply because we couldn't keep from rejoicing. We couldn't keep to ourselves because we had to share our good news, good news of great joy for all people, that a child has been born for us, a son has been given to us, a savior who is the Messiah, our Lord. It's amazing, really.

Amen.