

a sermon for Christmas 1B 2014

John 1:1-18

by Rev. Deby Veach

I found a story from the famous Danish philosopher from the mid 1800s, a Christian theologian named Soren Kierkegaard. It is a familiar story, a story rewritten by many over the ages in many different forms, yet it is still relevant today. Here's what he wrote:

A prince wanted to find a maiden suitable to be his queen. One day while running an errand in the local village for his father, he passed through a poor section. As he glanced out the windows of the carriage, his eyes fell upon a beautiful peasant maiden. During the ensuing days he often passed by the young lady and soon fell in love.

But he had a problem. How would he seek her hand? He could order her to marry him. But even a prince wants his bride to marry him freely and voluntarily and not through coercion. He could put on his most splendid uniform and drive up to her front door in a carriage drawn by six horses. But if he did this he would never be certain that the maiden loved him or was simply overwhelmed with all of the splendor.

The prince came up with another solution. He would give up his kingly robe. He moved into the village, entering not with a crown but in the garb of a peasant. He lived among the people, shared their interests and concerns, and talked their language. In time the maiden grew to love him, because of who he was and because he loved her first.

This very simple, almost childlike story is what John is describing in this morning's Gospel--God came and lived among us. He had to reveal Himself to us in an understandable way, and this is precisely what Jesus did--became flesh just like you and me. He made Himself understandable.

Jesus lived with us as one of us. He was accused countless times of eating with sinners and tax collectors. He healed the sick on the Sabbath. He had compassion for the poor. I think he even thought of himself as homeless because we hear Jesus saying in the gospels: foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. On Christmas Eve, we heard the story of Jesus being born in a stable because there was no room for Him in the inn. Next week, we will hear about Mary, Joseph and Jesus leaving their home and going to Egypt for safety from King Herod. Jesus knows what it is like to be without a place to call home. He came here to live among us, not as a king but as one of us. He lived among us, shared with us, talked to us about our concerns and we came to love him despite him not having a place to lay His head.

Last week when Bishop Cate was here for our celebration of new ministry, we renewed our baptismal covenant. You will remember there were 5 questions she asked to which we answered: I will with God's help. The last two questions ask us about seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves and will we strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. We all answered I will with God's help. This reminds me of Matthew 25 that we just heard this past fall: I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you invited me in, naked and you clothed me, sick and you took care of me, in prison

and you visited me. When Lord, did we do those things and Jesus answered just as you did to the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me.

There are people living in our area who are homeless, just like Jesus was at times in his life. They did not have any decorations up in their homes this year for Christmas because they live in cars, tents, cardboard boxes, abandoned houses and even dumpsters. And most of us will remember the danger of staying in a dumpster from a couple winters ago. A man and woman climbed into a dumpster to stay warm. The woman was severely injured while the man lost his life when the garbage truck came along and emptied the dumpster and ran the compactor. Some homeless people go to shelters during the cold months but others try to survive what Mother Nature sends our way. Even though it was a year ago, I don't think many of us have forgotten how cold last winter was and how long it lasted. I cannot imagine trying to huddle together with others in an abandoned house to keep warm while the wind is howling outside, or sleeping under an overpass, or trying to find a heating grate next to a building to sleep on to prevent freezing to death.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development requires a homeless point in time count at least every 2 years. It is done annually here in Vigo County. The 2011 count showed 205 homeless people in the city alone. But that number is going up. The Vigo County School Corporation does their own count for homeless students. Their last count revealed 338 homeless students. This amount includes children in grade school thru high school. Some children have trouble doing their homework-I don't know how homeless children study while trying to stay warm. Teenagers who are homeless sometimes "couch surf" at friends or relatives homes and are difficult to track so there may be even more than 338.

The vision of the US Inter-agency Council on Homelessness states that "No one should experience homelessness-no one should be without a safe stable place to call home. The Wabash Valley Planning council on homelessness for Region 7 which includes Vigo County has been working hard to end homelessness in our area for many years. Next month, Housing and Urban Development will conduct their annual point in time count. This count is used to measure effectiveness of programs for the homeless, to identify areas of deficiency in meeting needs of the homeless and to ultimately end homelessness altogether.

To qualify as homeless, you must be living out of doors, in a car, in a shelter or in a location not fit for human habitation-such as an abandoned building. If a person finds a place to stay overnight such as a friend's garage, basement or couch, they do not qualify to be counted as homeless. This is frustrating to the homeless count organizers. One organizer states: "I feel like they don't want very many people counted because then they would have to grant us more money to assist the homeless," she said of the Point in Time figures, which in part are used to determine funding for homelessness programs.

This is my second annual appeal to help the homeless and here is how we can help: we can donate items such as gloves, blankets, hygiene items, hot chocolate or coffee. I think anyone outside needs warm, dry feet so I plan on providing plenty of heavy socks. A person loses a lot of body heat thru an uncovered head so stocking hats are a must. I see a trip to Dollar Tree in the future, just like we did for the Holypalooza outreach projects. We can also donate \$5 gift cards from the fast food places. That way, if a homeless person needs to get inside to get warm, they will be able to buy something and sit for a while. I am sure our treasurer, Peggy Allen will take a check with homeless in

the memo line to help buy gift cards or other items to help keep fingers and toes warm this winter. Please bring your donations in for the first three Sundays in January and place them in the basket at the back of the church. On the 3rd Sunday, we will bag them up and take them to Bethany House and the Lighthouse Mission.

Now, if you are really interested in helping, you can volunteer for the count later in January with me. Help is needed to gather information and to distribute the donated items to the homeless. Information about the date and time for the count will be in a future bulletin.

Working as a nurse, I have always called taking care of the sick and dying as my ministry. But, when I go to work or here to church and see someone pushing a grocery cart down the sidewalk, I can't help but notice the tug on my heart. I grew up poor but I always had a warm roof over my head and something to eat. I cannot begin to imagine what it must be like to try to find a safe, warm place at night to sleep or even to rest. So, if you're feeling the same tug on your heart that I am, let's see what we can do to help the homeless in our area, many of whom are former members of our armed forces. Let's see what we can do to help them stay warm this winter.

Remember that by helping others in need we are in essence helping the Son of Man who came to live among us but had nowhere to lay his head.