

## Christmas

Reverend Joan M. Pettit Anders, Rector  
December 31, 2011 & January 1, 2012

For most of us, Christmas is over. We celebrated the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ on Christmas Day. Maybe by now we've begun to take down the decorations, the Christmas tree, the lights, the manger scenes. We have enjoyed the special music of the season, the wonderful pageant. But now it's time to move onto the next event: New Years. The surest sign about the passing of Christmas can be found in the retail stores, the malls, the secular world. They were taking down the Christmas decorations the day after Christmas to get ready for the next big retail event – Valentine's Day. And Christmas music is nowhere to be found on the radio.

But the church gives a different message to the world. Christmas is not over. In fact, in the words of the song, this is the 7<sup>th</sup> (8<sup>th</sup>) day of Christmas, and we continue to celebrate the nativity of Jesus until January 6<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the Epiphany.

The wonderful message about each of the Gospel stories about the birth of Jesus is this: "The Word, that's Jesus, was made flesh and came to live among us." In the original Greek, the words "to live among us" are translated as "to pitch a tent." The Word was made flesh and pitched a tent among us. I love that image. Jesus has set up camp with us.

It's a great metaphor, especially for those among us who are campers. Who's ever gone camping? I did that a lot growing up. Mostly camping with a trailer. We went all over the east coast from the Outer Banks, NC to Nova Scotia, saw so much and had lots of family fun. Plus I had several years of camping with youth groups in various churches – at the Creation Concert, a week-long event in central PA; in Vermont at Calvin Coolidge State Forest.

Those experiences taught me many things, but foremost was that everyone is there for everyone else. Tenting together requires each person to pull their share of the work, the problems, as well as the fun. It is tough to do it on your own.

A year and a half ago I traveled to many new places during my sabbatical – to South Africa, to Scotland, England and all around the United States. I knew very little about the towns I visited, and in some cases, very little about the countries. But in each locale, I had a guide; someone who knew the lay of the land. Those people got me safely from place to place; got me into places I wouldn't have known to go; and I learned so much more by seeing it through their eyes. The perfect guide was Nicola (nick'a-la) in Scotland. She was a native of the country, maybe about 30 years old. She not only showed us the sights, but she told us the stories behind the history, shared the music of the land, hiked us through the hills to see what we would have never found on our own. I saw the country through her eyes – a country she loves and knows so well. My trip was easier and more fulfilling because of Nicola's expertise, and so much more special because she was by my side.

With the birth of Jesus, God pitched a tent among us. Jesus now lives at our side and is with us to guide us through. We can try to stumble through life without Jesus. But that's exactly what it is – stumbling. We make wrong turns. We miss opportunities around us. We make wrong decisions and create disasters. It's easy to get disoriented in our everyday lives. But we have a guide in Jesus. He's tenting with us. Like Nicola in my Scotland journey, Jesus is with us to guide us through our everyday lives and through new experiences. And just as Nicola did, Jesus will, at the same time, point out the beauty and the significance of what's around us. He's our guide.

There's another very important aspect to Jesus pitching tent with us; that is that we are not alone. As we face exciting and new opportunities, He's there. As we face daily struggles, He is there. When fear or frightening circumstances arise, He walks with us. He is our guide through all of life. We do not have to do it on our own. A gift given to each of us. He has pitched tent with us.

The world has moved on, leaving Christmas behind. We carry it with us every day because we know Jesus is with us. "The Word was made flesh and came to live among us."

***"Lead me, guide me along the way  
For if you lead me, I cannot stray.  
Lord, let me walk each day with thee,  
Lead me, Oh Lord, lead me."***

## **“Again I say, Rejoice!”**

The Reverend Timothy Holder, Associate Rector  
Christmas, December 24, 25

*For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor, you have broken. ISAIAH 9:2-7*

Merry Christmas, Christ Church! “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people,” the angel proclaimed to the frightened shepherds that night. “Let the heavens rejoice, and let earth be glad,” we sing from Psalm 96. “Shout out for joy to the Lord, all you lands; lift up your voice, rejoice and sing,” we hear the 98<sup>th</sup>. Christ the Savior is born, our redeemer who has called us “friend,” our everlasting savior, real and present, giving and forgiving.

Our world, our nation and communities have faced some of difficult times these past years: hunger, disease and death of children at the hands of over-consumption and apathy; falling economies, joblessness and home foreclosures at the hands of greed and power; 4,500 war dead (USA) and 160,000 (Iraq) almost unnoticed, one of two major theatres of war; political ineptitude; social unrest; churches, mosques and synagogues look for a way; ravaging storm and environmental upheaval; we wonder, where does it stop? Joy?

But isn't that the point? ‘Real God is real Love,’ raps the poet. And that love is not ‘cheap’ or happenstance another disciple reminds us. Why do we celebrate in joy, song and exclamation? Nothing wrong with easy sentimentality, but in “times like these, you need a savior,” in the words of an old Southern Gospel. We sing, we shout, we embrace friend and stranger because our Savior is born. He is Jesus Christ the Lord.

Joy and celebration are the very nature of Love, which the Jesus comes to bring. Yes, we know the false world of sin and death in this life. But it's nothing that Love cannot face. That's why God came as a little, powerless baby – “grace and truth” – and to save the whole, wide world. Your joy this blessed Christmas is that which redeems and saves. Keep it forever. Shout it out without fail. Love is victory! Merry Christmas, Christ Church!

***“Again I say, Rejoice!”***

## **“Dominican Republic Missionary”**

Charlie Nakash

October 29-30, 2011

Good Morning: My name is Charlie Nakash and I have been approved and appointed as a Missionary to the Dominican Republic by the National Church, by our own Bishop, Bishop Councill of the Diocese of New Jersey, and by the Bishop of the Diocese of the Dominican Republic, Bishop Holguin. I have been asked to begin as Missionary in early 2012.

The last week of September I visited the Dominican Republic to meet Bishop Holguin and to see the diocese. The Dominican Republic is a mission Diocese which means all monies for support come from the National Church and from dioceses in the United States that are in a companion relationship with it. In the diocese of NJ, for example, we are currently in a companion relationship with Ecuador Central.

This is a very fast growing diocese. In the last 10 years the number of churches and schools has doubled. They now have 24 schools and in 2009, 5000 children were educated. The only thing holding back greater expansion is the lack of clergy, teachers and of course money. They have 8 new seminarians and plans are now in place for new churches and schools in the north section of Dominican Republic and so, --- there is still a great need. Now more then ever the church is growing thanks to the generosity of the Companion Dioceses and contributors. According to the government statistics, about 42 % of the people in this country live below extreme poverty. They earn less than \$1 dollar a day.

Now I know it is sometimes hard to understand these situations unless you see it for yourself. But maybe through my experiences, I can help you to understand it better. We have poor people in the United States and our government provides food stamps, social services, and section 8 housing. In addition, churches like ours offer safety nets through programs like Interfaith Hospitality Network, the Café, food pantries, Grandmothers cupboard and so on. There are many who help. But in the Dominican Republic, only the Church provides for the poor. There is no government support. And the churches' resources there are much more limited than what we find in this country.

On my trip to the Dominican Republic, I went to many churches and schools to evaluate the buildings and to meet with the priests, principals and teachers. The schools start at preschool and go through high school and teach several thousand children. Many dioceses, 14 in all, in the United States assist these schools with scholarships for the students. They also help with building clinics, schools and churches and send medical teams to assist the clinics. The only place for children to go to school is where our churches and schools are located. In these areas there are no public schools for them to attend. Children in both public and private schools wear a uniform which does away with class distinction. Most families cannot afford clothes and so each child gets one uniform and every night the parents have to wash them for the next day. Oh, by the way, they don't have washing machines or dryers. They wash in whatever water they can find and somehow press the uniforms for the next day without electricity.

When I was there, I discovered that many of the buildings are in desperate need of repair. I found it particularly bad in 3 of the schools. When it rains the children have to be sent home because the roofs leak; not only in one spot, but the whole roof. Some churches are also in disrepair with leaking roofs, cracking walls, need for windows and caulking to protect from the weather and iron bars to protect from vandals. They can use all the help we could supply. Most of the schools and churches have electricity but it's only for maybe 2 hours every day because of the shortage of electricity in the Dominican Republic. They have generators in some of those places to keep the schools open but they are very expensive to operate. The cost of gasoline to run the generators is \$6 per gallon. The people also lack some of the most basic things we take for granted – like dry shelter, clean drinking water, electricity, education and a safe environment for their children.

When I visited the Dominican Republic, I realized that even though they have very little and live in an 8x8 shack; they still invited us into their homes for fellowship. It is very humbling to see the affection, hospitality and spirit of God in their lives.

This is just a glimpse of the poverty that exists in the Dominican Republic. The people are making do with what they have but are looking forward to our help to assist them to have a better living standard. We have safety nets all around us that we take for granted just in case we should ever need them. With your help, we can provide a safer and more secure place for them to live as well. One of the assignments the Bishop is giving to me is to teach the construction trade to the local people so they can make a better living, and lift themselves out of extreme poverty.

In addition, he would like me to make recommendations on how they can better utilize their existing buildings. Using some of these buildings to teach people different trades will create additional jobs. In doing this it will help offset the cost for the diocese as well. For example, right now the diocese buys the uniforms for the children because the families can't afford them. If we use one of the buildings already planned for vocational training, we can teach the parents to make the uniforms, which would save the Diocese a lot of money. By doing this, the diocese would have more money to provide more scholarships to students and to hire more teachers.

The National Episcopal Church only has a total of 70 missionaries assigned around the world in various countries. As of January 2012, I am now going to be one of them and I am very excited about what we can do together to make a difference. I have been instructed by the National Church that each missionary needs to raise their own money so as not to take anything away from the people we are serving. The National Church will provide me with health insurance and the diocese of the Dominican Republic will provide me with an unfurnished apartment. I am responsible for everything else. The diocese of the Dominican Republic has also informed me that I am responsible for providing a pickup truck to the diocese for my use. Mother Joan put out a request on the national level for me to see if we can find a truck for this purpose. We've already had one contact in Virginia who is researching the possibility for us. Please keep this in your prayers. It is exciting to see all this come to fulfillment.

In today's Collect it says, "Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service". Each of us is given gifts and blessings from God and what we do with them is up to us. For me, being a missionary is one of the ways I can serve God. I can teach construction trades to help people have better jobs which will help lift them out of poverty. Teaching construction trades can also help them change contaminated water to potable water; it will allow for better housing, and it will provide the capability to repair churches and schools. I am excited and looking forward to using my knowledge and skills that God has blessed me with to help change the lives of others. Also I'll be working closely with other missionary teams coming from the United States to make a difference. And I invite you to join with me in this endeavor. Mother Joan has said to me that the money collected from our "Noisy Sundays" can be used directly for the cost of materials needed for projects. We are very fortunate to live in the United States. We pretty much have the best of everything. Some countries are not as fortunate.

The Gospel for today is very interesting to think about today. It talks about the scribes and the Pharisees who make everyone else wait on them and they don't do any work themselves. They think they should have places of honor and get the best of everything while others have heavy burdens to bear. So Jesus reprimands them.

From this we know we have to treat others as brothers and sisters. We have an opportunity now to step out in faith and put into action that people who live in poverty in the Dominican Republic are indeed our brothers and sisters. I sense it is my call to offer direct help to them.

In the gospel of Matthew 25:40 it says, “I assure you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me”. So when we feed someone, clothe someone, help those who are sick, provide better housing, we are doing it to Jesus. Not just for Jesus; to Jesus. The responsibility of Missionaries, and the Church, is to be Christ-like in all places; to spread the Gospel and to do as Christ has commanded us to do. I am discerning how God will use me to do this, and I am willing to find out. With your help (both spiritual and financial), we can do this together; we can change peoples’ lives that not only need our help, but want it and appreciate everything. In the bulletin today is an insert including my Vision Statement as a missionary to the Dominican Republic, and a letter from Bishop Holguin explaining his vision for me working there. Please ask me questions. I’d love to talk with you further about this opportunity.

I look forward to serving Christ in this manner, along with the Dominican people and my home church. Thank you.

AMEN.