Christmas Eve, 2012

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I have a confession to make. I'm not perfect. I know, it's shocking! After the craziness of seminary, where much of December was taken up with finals, and last December in particular was taken up with General Ordination Exam preparation (kind of like the Bar exam but three days longer and with way fewer big words)…after the craziness of the past three years, I fully expected THIS year to be different.

I was going to bake cookies and make candy. I even had this notion of baking little gifts for you all, which I now realize would have definitely been carrying coals to Newcastle. But I was going to do it. I was going to decorate my office in something other than an Early Staples Explosion motif. I was going to get all my shopping done, which I actually did by the expedient of deciding that most people were going to get Epiphany presents instead of Christmas presents.

I was going to plan beautiful and meaningful holiday liturgies, with songs everyone could sing, months in advance. I was going to visit every old person and shut-in in Huron, and maybe bring them some of the leftover cookies and candy that I didn't give to you. I was going to write Christmas cards and actually mail them before Christmas.

Did I do any of those things? Sigh…as I said, I'm not perfect and Christmas really snuck up on me once again this year. I suspect it snuck up on a lot of us.

Today we heard the much-loved story of the birth of Jesus that inspired so many of our favorite Christmas carols, Silent Night, O Little Town of Bethlehem, The First Noel.

I think we're sometimes like the Inn in the story today. We fill up all of the best rooms with buying presents, sending cards, making cookies, and of course the very best room – the Imperial Suite – goes to our most prevalent Christmas tradition, stressing out about what didn't get done this year. With all of the rooms filled, the poor little baby Jesus gets relegated to the stable. In fact, if we'd thought about it, we might have even put something out there, and left Jesus out in the cold.

The Gospel wouldn't sound nearly so nice if it said, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of old newspapers and lying in an old refrigerator box under a bridge because that's the best they can do.”

Think about those shepherds for a minute. The angels appeared to them, scaring the socks off of them, and told them about the birth of their Messiah. The angels told them where to find Jesus, and what to look for. Simple, huh?

But these were one of two types of shepherds. They were either the owners of their own sheep or they were hired by the owners to watch the flocks. Either way, sailing off to Bethlehem was going to be no easy task. If they left their flocks a-straying, as the carol says, they ran into the real problem of either losing them to wild animals, having them wander off, or getting fired for being bad shepherds. No matter what, they would lose their livelihood. And the logistical problem of rounding up a bunch of sheep, which I guess are pretty hard to round up in a hurry, and taking them all into Bethlehem with them is probably not even worth thinking of.

But the shepherds weren't thinking of any of these problems. They were thinking of the Christ Child, whom they were going to have the privilege of seeing first hand and worshiping. They dropped what they were doing and said to each other, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” They made room in their lives for Jesus – this poor little baby in a manger, this Son of God, this Messiah.

How much of Christmas are we willing to give up to make room at the inn for Jesus? Can we, at the very least, give up the stress that lives in the best suite? I know we're not supposed to make resolutions for another week, but I want to make some now. I resolve to make more room for Christ in my life, funny as that sounds, coming from a priest. I resolve to take more time in prayer and less in worry. I resolve to leave my sheep sometimes, whatever they may be on a given day, and seek out the Son of God in his stable. And much as I love my job, and I DO love it, I resolve to love God even more.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." The very least we can do is to make room for that Son in our hearts and in our lives, tonight, tomorrow, and always.