

Isaiah 9:2-7 Psalm 96 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

During dinnertime, the news is very often the background noise at my house. I seem to be able to keep track of the events of the day while I prepare supper. Occasionally, however, I lose my appetite! Over the last few months we've heard of little else but the national election, the pandemic, the much anticipated vaccine, and the economic fallout from the pandemic. This year has been surreal on so many levels. The most pressing matters concern our struggle with COVID-19 and all of its implications and destruction. Our lives have been disastrously disrupted. And the safety of our very lives is on the line. In order to stay safe and protect ourselves and others, we're wearing masks everywhere we go. And because we want to stay safe, there are many places that we can't go. Restaurants have been severely restricted. Gyms are closed. Family members are cutting each other's hair. Grocery stores have one way arrows on the floor so customers won't get too close to each other. Movie theaters are closed and live theaters are dark. And many businesses have completely closed their doors leaving an army of unemployed people in the rubble. In addition to everything else we need to think about, we have anxieties about the economy and our neighbors' welfare as well as our own. And it seems that no matter what we want to do or where we want to go, we now have to make alternative plans. It's getting pretty hard to be creative! It's exhausting! The worst part, particularly at this time of year, is our inability to gather with family and friends to celebrate this most sacred holiday...Christmas. It's the biggest celebration of the year...even if you aren't a Christian. But this year, more than ever, we are feeling disconnected. We are disconnected from people we love even if we can talk to them over ZOOM or FaceTime. We can be grateful for technology, but it's not the same. We are disconnected from our normal routines. We are disconnected from our sense of security and well-being. And we are disconnected from all the rituals that we follow to celebrate Christmas in ways that are meaningful to us. Many people will be spending Christmas completely alone this year...perhaps for the first time in their lives. And over 300,000 people...just in the US...have died from COVID-19 this year. They leave behind family and friends who are grieving for them and are feeling painfully disconnected from them. It seems a cruel irony that at a most vulnerable time in our lives...a special holiday and the anxiety about our health and well-being...we are disconnected from the ones we need the most. It hardly seems fair! Believe it or not, this is the broken world that Jesus chooses to enter. And this is the night that we set aside to celebrate his arrival. Stop and think for a minute about the circumstances that surrounded him. His earthly parents were not yet married. Toward the end of Mary's pregnancy, she and Joseph...along with everyone else...have been unceremoniously required to travel...on foot...some 90+ miles from their hometown of Nazareth to Joseph's familial ancestry home of Bethlehem. By the way, that's about the same distance as it is from northern Virginia to Charlottesville. As many times as many of us have made that trip, none of us did it on foot! And the terrain from Nazareth to Bethlehem is far more challenging!! When the young couple arrive in Bethlehem, they can't find a place to stay. Everybody...and his

brother...or so it seems...has travelled to Bethlehem and all of them need to sleep somewhere. None of Mary's family or Joseph's family are with them to help them. They are disconnected from family at the most crucial moment their young lives have ever faced. This baby is about to be born...and not only is there no bed and bath for Mary...there's no one but Joseph there to help her bring her child into the world. She must have been exhausted, in desperate need of a shower or bath, and probably ravenously hungry...not to mention just a bit anxious!! None of the people and things she needed were available to her. She was completely disconnected from her support system and from the resources that took care of her physical needs. It hardly seems fair! But in the midst of all of that disruption and deprivation and disconnection, the most amazing event the world has ever known took place. The child that the Angel Gabriel had told Mary about arrives safely into the world. It was an event without fanfare. There was no luxury here for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. No doctor. No nurses. No midwife. No room service. No hot bath with extra towels. No warm comfortable bed for either Mary or Joseph. And Jesus himself would probably have been more comfortable in a regular cradle rather than a wooden manger with no padding. And he would probably have felt more secure snugly wrapped in a warm blanket rather than in strips of cloth. With all the luxuries and creature comforts we have in our world, it's hard to imagine what this experience must have been like for Mary and Joseph. They must have felt completely disconnected...not only from their extended family and from their neighbors and from their friends...but from Mary's parents and Joseph's parents...and from all that was familiar to them. You would think that God would have planned something a bit more opulent for the arrival of Jesus into the world, wouldn't you? But here were Mary and Joseph...two very young and inexperienced people all alone. It hardly seems fair! The only other human beings Mary and Joseph saw that night were a few mystified and gawking shepherds who showed up...unannounced...to see the baby Jesus. These shepherds were teenagers themselves. They had been out in the fields with their sheep...keeping an eye 2 on them...and keeping each other company. All of them had been startled when a group of angels appeared in the night sky telling them to go see this baby that had been born in Bethlehem. Under other circumstances, we might have wondered if they had hallucinated when they saw the angels...but group hallucinations aren't possible...and all of them saw and heard the angels. That experience was so compelling...and perhaps disturbing...that they abandoned their sheep and went looking for this baby in Bethlehem...the one wrapped up in bands of cloth that was lying in a manger. At that moment, when they took off for Bethlehem, they were disconnected from their flock...from their responsibilities...and perhaps from all that had seemed 'normal' to them in their lives. What had just happened to them was certainly not routine. This must have been a totally disorienting experience for them! When the shepherds had seen the Baby Jesus, they left the little family alone again and went back to their flock sharing the news of what they had heard and seen with anyone who would listen. Their lives would never again be the same. And God had chosen this little band of shepherds...the lowliest rung on the social ladder...the ones whose reputations were so suspect that they weren't even allowed to testify in a court of law...to be the first visitors and the first witnesses to the entrance of the Son of God into the world. That's a preview of God's plan to

upend the social order among human beings! The high and mighty did not see the Son of God first. There were no royal heralds that spread the news to the populous at large. There was no fanfare...no red carpet...no five star accommodations. And after the shepherds left, this little holy family was once again left alone. Well, not completely alone. Within that primitive little shelter where Jesus had been born was the presence of God. The most important connection Mary and Joseph could possibly have had was right there with them through all of it...protecting them, encouraging them, reassuring them, teaching them, and loving them...through what must have been a harrowing experience for both of them. They were connected to each other and they were connected to God. That's all the connection they needed to bring the Son of God, the infant Jesus, safely into the world. So, on this blessed night when we celebrate the most crucial event that has ever happened in the lives of human beings...and all creation...we can contemplate our own sense of loss and disconnection. As we live through and celebrate this most sacred occasion, stop and think for a moment about your own connection with God, your creator...or perhaps your sense of disconnection with God and with others. Remember, God loves you no less than he loves his own son. God saw to it that Jesus entered the world safely. God made sure that Mary and Joseph were well-connected to each other and to God and that they had everything they actually needed. 2 Sometimes our sense of disconnection strips away any number of distractions in our lives that prevent us from focusing our attention on what is really important to us. It's easy to get caught up in the temporal and sometimes to forget the eternal. In the midst of our sense of disconnection lies the opportunity for us to grow. It is in the painful places in our lives that we come face-to-face with our true selves and connect with ourselves in a way that powerfully guides our future. Without our customary 'go-to' distractions, we are left to get acquainted with our true self...the one God created us to be. It's easy to lose track of the most vital connections we have...the one with ourselves, the one with our creator, God, who with the Son and the Holy Spirit supplies all the connection we need or desire...the most powerful connection of all. Take advantage of that. Seize this moment of disconnection that may never come again for any of us. Dwell with the things that are actually the most important. Jesus' entry into the world...that we celebrate on this most holy night...has ensured the fact that we will always be connected to the Father, through Jesus himself. Thanks be to God. AMEN.