

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for Christmas Eve 2015
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Several years ago, about a week before Christmas, a member of our church who worked with mentally handicapped adults came by to tell me about six group homes where there would be no Christmas trees and where ten residents in those homes had no family to provide presents for them to open on Christmas morning. Then she asked me, "Is there any way our church can help?" I told her not to worry, "There is a way!"

That very night, at the outreach meeting, a request for help was presented and there was an immediate and generous response. The landscape nursery next door to us provided the trees after we explained the situation. Decorations for the trees and gifts for every resident were provided by church members. On Christmas Day, those men and women had a beautiful Christmas and gifts to unwrap because people in that church know **there is a way** for people in situations like that to be taken care of.

That memory led me to think about how the people of St. John's have responded to human need through the years:

- Last week, Hansen Hall and the Narthex were filled with items provided through the Santa Fund for people in need who wanted to have nice gifts for their children at Christmas. People from St. John's and the entire community participated, because they are people who know **there is a way** for children in the homes of these neighbors to be taken care of.
- In the early days of this parish, St. John's brought the first physician to Jackson Hole and built its first hospital. People here knew that our sick neighbors needed health care. They knew **there is a way** to bring healing and hope to those who are sick.
- In response to the perception that there are hungry people in Jackson Hole, the Jackson Cupboard was organized and St. John's offered space from which to operate. People here knew then and know now that **there is a way** for physical hunger to be relieved.
- When people in this parish realized that there are neighbors living in Jackson Hole who can't afford clothing and household items from the usual sources for their families, they founded Browse 'n' Buy, because they believed **there is a way** to help people in those circumstances.
- St. John's participated in the organization of the Community Resource Center in response to other needs. St. John's members continue to be involved in the work of CRC, which is housed on our campus. Through this community service, lives are transformed because people here know that **there is a way** to lift up the fallen and put strong wings on those who are weak.
- When 12 Step groups needed a dedicated place to meet, they approached St. John's. St. John's didn't hesitate. Today, over 100 men and women in recovery come to meetings at St. John's. They recognize the generous hospitality of the people of this parish who knew then and know now that **there is a way** to help people overcome crippling addiction and hang on to the joys of a sober life.
- When the Latino Resource Center needed a new home, St. John's reached out and invited them to set up their offices in these buildings. Day in and day out, the LRC demonstrates to those who are the strangers in the gate of Jackson that there are people here who know **there is a way** to help them.
- In response to the rising tide of violence in our land, the people of St. John's have been involved in offering

learning opportunities and sacred conversations to address domestic violence, sexual violence, gun violence, suicide prevention, and prevention of child abuse. Although the problem is enormous and the political challenges are at times intentionally intimidating, our people believe **there is a way** to safeguard God's beloved.

- Our Church is a worldwide Church. Members of St. John's and others from the community have gone to Cuba to serve. Through the work of Episcopal Relief and Development, our Church responds to human tragedies all over the earth. Through the Episcopal Church, we share ministries with millions of others. In places too numerous to number, in the United States where hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, blizzards and other natural disasters impact human communities; in Syria, Tanzania, South America, in schools, hospitals, churches, there are deacons and priests and educators and nurses and social workers and engineers and doctors, giving people new hope and not just telling them, but showing them that **there is a way**. Our people here know that human need does not cease at the county line and God's love and compassion does not either. They know **there is a way** to help our own and help others beyond our village to the ends of the earth.
- Recipients of all these ministries have seen the face of Christ in the faces of people from these pews who know that because of God's enormous love, **there is a way**.

And, today, God wants each of us gathered here tonight to be reminded that **there is a way**. There is a way for life to be filled with a meaning and a purpose beyond life itself. There is a way for human relationships which have been broken to be healed. There is a way for the human spirit to be uplifted day by day until it bursts the bonds of this earthly life and inhabits the wonderful mystery of the life eternal. There is a way for violence to cease, prisoners to be set free, oppression to be no more, the hungry to be fed, the homeless to be housed, the sick to be healed, the wounded to be made whole.

That word of hope is addressed to the whole world in general, and to each of us in particular. God works like that. God is concerned with all of us, yet with each of us as if there is only one of us to love. And, when we experience God's concern, know God's love, in that way, we are changed. We gain a new perspective, a new foothold, a new appreciation for ourselves and others.

When I made my first trip to Bethlehem, I was surprised at how ordinary and how dumpy the place is. There is really very little space devoted to the Church of the Nativity and the little grotto where pilgrims have come since at least the fourth century to commemorate Jesus' birth. The church kind of blends in with the surrounding shops and everything there is the same color, limestone.

And yet, as I stood and looked at little Bethlehem in all its ordinariness and world-wornness, it became clear to me that the place is what Christmas is all about. In the midst of streets that seem to say, "no way", there is a holy space where the "Way" was born of the small womb of a human mother. In a very out-of-the-way place, a way from darkness to light, from death to life, was opened for all humanity. In Bethlehem, in the mystery of the Incarnation, God entered human flesh and earth was wed to heaven. The most mysterious is the most common, the ultimate is also intimate, and the magnificent gives meaning to the mundane.

There is a way! When he came into the world to be the way, they laid him in a manger. He understands the human predicament from the outside in and the inside out. There is no pain too deep for him to relieve. There is no wrong so great he cannot right it. There is no void too vast for him to fill. And, there is no need he cannot meet. He invites us to trust him. He is the way God get things done through you and me.

Christmas is not just about a sweet baby, lowing cattle, and shepherds. Christmas is about the entrance of the Creator of the universe into human history to redeem it. He wants to be the Way you get things done in your life. He wants to enter into your soul and sit down and share a feast of love with you. If you let him, he'll change you. He'll tell you your true worth. He'll make you laugh. Won't you welcome him? Today? Is there a way? Yes, there is. A Way in a manger. And, for us, he is The Way.