

A Plan for Those not in Charge
A Sermon on Luke 2:1-20 by the Rev. Philip Major
December 24, 2025 ~ St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY

Two years ago, in October of 2023, we broke ground on the *Open Doors* renovation project. An enormous amount of work has been completed, including new, expanded toilet rooms, new roofs on every single square inch of the Parish House, and an elevator to the second floor. One of the results of *Open Doors* is that many parts of our building function better and look much better than they did before. The Sargent Foyer, with the new entrance from the parking lot, is my new favorite place in the building. People enter the building more safely through the new entrance. During the day the foyer is beautiful with light streaming in through the glass doors.

As you can guess, this was not the kind of construction project where we signed a contract and then sat back and watched the work proceed smoothly. For the past two years Betsy Elkins, Doug Mouncey and I have had primary responsibility for making sure that *Open Doors* renovation project gets completed and gets done right, hopefully during our lifetimes. We called our little team PMEC, which stands for the Project Management Executive Committee. Most weeks Betsy, Doug and I met for an hour to keep track of the details of the renovation.

With a name like the Project Management Executive Committee you might get the impression that Betsy, Doug and I were in charge. Let me assure you, we almost never felt like we were in charge. For Betsy, Doug and me, the *Open Doors* renovations seemed to be something that was happening to us, as opposed to something where we felt like we were in charge.

Between the summer of 2023 and December of 2025, Betsy, Doug and I had to find the best response to just about every possible delay and change of plans you can imagine. Hundreds of details for the project, such as whether the door to the choir hallway would have a lock on it, had to be considered. Several thousand emails have been written between us and the construction professionals. Decisions had to be made, and many of them had to be made a second time when the original decision was found to be unworkable. Once each month we met with the construction team and other leaders from St. Paul's to talk through all of the issues and get a new list of questions to be answered. Please keep in mind that it's my job to do this kind of work, but Betsy and Doug are volunteers.

To our dismay, the meetings and reports and emails have continued right through to the end of 2025. About a week ago Doug spent several full days making the final submission to the State of New York so St. Paul's could receive the rest of our Historic Preservation grant. Just yesterday, Betsy wrote another very professional email to the contractor, asking why the scaffolding hasn't been removed from the alley.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. We have pushed as hard as we can to get things finished, but Betsy, Doug, and I have not felt like we are the ones in charge. It has felt like all we could do was to try to keep things moving in the right direction.

Mary and Joseph were in a similar sort of situation. We don't know exactly what Mary and Joseph were thinking or feeling before the events described in the Gospels, but we know Mary and Joseph had a plan. Their plan did not include Mary giving birth to a baby before they were married. Their plan did not include their baby being born in the place where they kept the animals.

Mary and Joseph's plan was that they would marry one another, and then they would begin their life together. Then they would begin their work together as the adults in the family, as the parents. But life was not going according to the plans they had made.

Joseph and Mary were not feeling like they were in charge of things. Life was happening to them. They were not following the plan they had created for their lives.

For Mary, recognition that she was not at all in charge must have come somewhere around the time the angel Gabriel came to visit her. Joseph had his own encounter with an angel. According to the Gospel of Matthew, *An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* We cannot know what was going through Joseph's mind when he was confronted with this news, but we can be pretty sure he did not feel like life was proceeding according to his plans.

By the time Mary and Joseph began their journey to Bethlehem, I'm guessing they were feeling like what Betsy, Doug and I have been feeling during the past year. Mary and Joseph were resigned to the reality that the details of life were not in their control. They were just trying to keep things moving in the right direction.

When they arrived in Bethlehem there was no place for them in the inn, so Mary and Joseph took shelter in the place where they kept the animals. It was not a clean place. There was no bed there for Mary. When Mary had given birth to the little baby, she wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in the trough that was used to feed the animals. The little baby would be safe there.

Life for Mary and Joseph has moved from normal to something quite unexpected, and eventually into complete disorder. Life is not going according to their plans, but Mary and Joseph do not give up. Mary and Joseph stay focused on what is most important.

In this unexpected time, God worked a miracle. God's living presence was born into our world in a time of chaos and violence, in a time of exhaustion and uncertainty.

Compared to what Mary and Joseph experienced, life has been relatively calm and orderly for most of us at St. Paul's. But I have been slightly overwhelmed by the challenges of life in recent months. A few weeks ago, one of my friends asked me what sort of special things we had planned for St. Paul's for the season of Advent.

I felt a little bit embarrassed. I spent all of my extra time in September, October, and November attending construction meetings, and organizing our crew of members as we've been painting the dining room, and trying to wrap my mind around the details of the new security system and the rebuilding of the parking lot. So I responded a bit sheepishly that I didn't have anything special planned for St. Paul's for Advent.

But it seems God might have planned something special for St. Paul's for the season of Advent. God is doing work in the world we do not see or understand. As disciples our job is to try to see the work God is doing, and to play a small part in what God is doing.

A few years ago Catholic Charities opened a new warming shelter, just two blocks from St. Paul's. The warming shelter on East Onondaga Street provides shelter for forty people each night during the winter. The shelter does not provide meals or have beds, just forty upholstered chairs in a large room. A single occupancy toilet room is available for the guests to use. The shelter is open each night from 4 pm until 8 am.

We don't know the reasons why the individuals who take refuge at the shelter don't have better places to live, but we know that people don't choose to be homeless. People try to make their way through life as best they can, but bad things happen. Sometimes bad things happen to us even though we have worked as hard as we can to make the right decisions at every turn in our lives. As people who worship a savior who was born in a barn, our response to people who find themselves in difficult circumstances is to be compassionate. As Christians, our response to people who don't have a home or apartment of their own is to serve them and welcome them.

So a new kind of joy entered my heart on a Sunday a few weeks ago. A few weeks ago the weather became colder and I noticed we were welcoming a few extra visitors each Sunday. My heart was glad when I realized that several of our new visitors were people who had taken refuge

at the Catholic Charities warming shelter the previous night. Some of our visitors were especially glad to discover that St. Paul's has beautiful, new, expanded toilet rooms.

It wasn't our plan. When we made plans to build new toilet rooms, I wasn't thinking that many of the first people to use these toilets would be people who had spent the night at the Catholic Charities warming shelter.

But I'm guessing it might be part of God's plan that the new toilet rooms would be ready for some important, unexpected guests. I didn't really have anything special planned, but God had something special planned for us during the season of Advent.

Once again, God has worked a wonder of God's love in our lives, in a way we did not expect. God has worked a little miracle of love, bringing people together in ways we do not expect and in ways we might not appreciate. God has worked a little miracle in our lives, giving us the opportunity to welcome and serve people with compassion, the same way God is compassionate to us.

Today we celebrate the birth of God's love in our lives because God's plan is so much better than the plans we make. Today we celebrate God being born into the world and breaking into our lives with a message of love and hope. Today we give thanks for the love and the living presence of Emmanuel, God with us.