

## Pastor's Reflections

by Jeffrey E. Frantz

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)*

**The expectation of Christmas.** Recently in our church, we've been talking about *living towards expectation*. In our Stewardship drive, we emphasized the need to *give towards expectation*. Faith is about our hopes and expectations. It's about the promises of tomorrow and the possibilities on the horizon.

What is so powerful about our Christian story is the way it looks towards the future. Indeed, a question for us at Christmas is how do we embrace the future? Everyday, we have to choose; and it makes all the difference.

I've often wondered: *what were the expectations of Joseph and Mary when they worked their way towards Bethlehem to comply with the decree for a census?* Certainly, they had a lot on their plate. Mary was pregnant with her firstborn and, although engaged, they were not yet married. More, still, they were poor. And yet, this is the background of the one we call Savior.

As we note every week in our congregational gatherings, these are tough times. Employment prospects are trapped in the playing out of larger forces which we don't fully understand—forces like globalization, restructuring and the retraining millions in our labor force. And so, times are, indeed, stressful and worrisome.

Still, God comes to us once again in a Bethlehem manger and hope bursts forth from the most humble of beginnings. Through the Christmas story and through us as people of faith, the Spirit moves. The expectation of Christmas lives on.

**The new face of hope.** Deprivation is nothing we would ever wish on anyone. Still, deprivation has a way of putting us in touch with what is really important in our lives: not the scope of our purchasing power, but the opportunity to support one another, to simply *be* in each other's presence and to celebrate the gift of family and friends.

Out of these tough times, new awareness and resolve will emerge—about us and our future, about our nation and our interconnectedness with the other nations of the earth. The new face of hope is that we are one human family—both here at home and abroad. Working our way through tough times makes us all more human. It reminds us, again,

how we are interdependent, how we need one another.

Imagine how the birth of Jesus grew to ignite an enduring hope around the world. It didn't happen over night; and it didn't happen in a vacuum of historical context. It happened, day by day, action by action, through people of faith—people like you and me and countless millions and millions of others over the centuries.

Friends, Christmas IS expectation. It is the expectation of what we can grow to become and the expectation of what we dare to believe we can accomplish for God's purposes.

On that first Christmas, there was probably very little fanfare and no small amount of worry about what tomorrow would bring. Still, out of the least and lowest of things, look what magnificence God has wrought.

In these times marked by uncertainty and instability on many fronts, may the expectation of Christmas continue to warm our hearts and lift our spirits! When expectations are high and the spirit is aflame, hope indeed wins the day.

Friends, together, we are the new face of hope.