

## ***Pastor's Reflections***

*By Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz*

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, 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. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.** (Matthew 1:18-21)*

**In the midst of a very human world, God comes.** Friends, this is the good news of Christmas. Just as with Joseph and Mary, our lives are never perfect. Always, there are challenges and rough edges we have to contend with.

Imagine the very real circumstances of the young couple. Mary is pregnant; they're not married. What are they going to do? It can't be easy. And on top of it all, they're poor as well. And yet, this is the *life situation* that forms the background for the birth of God's Messiah.

What this means for us—and particularly in these stressful, economic times—is that God comes into the heart of the *messiness* of the world with God's message of grace and sacrificial love no matter what the circumstances of our lives.

As we've noted, again and again in recent months, we're living in tough times. We can't help but be seriously concerned about what all of this means—particularly with regard to continued employment and the retirement many of us thought we had tucked away for our later years. For countless millions, retirement may be put on indefinite hold. And the tenuousness of job security creates anxiety throughout our communities.

Everywhere we turn, people are losing their jobs and there's a freeze on hiring. And perhaps more than anything, it's the uncertainty of it all that's unsettling.

**A silver lining.** However, there may be a silver lining in all of this because times of deprivation have a way of putting us in touch with what is really important in our lives: not the gifts we can no longer afford to buy for one another, but the opportunity to simply be in each other's presence and to celebrate the gifts of family and friends. Rather than *buying* things for each other, we can *do* things for one another and *make* things to share.

My guess is that this Christmas will bring less spending and more *special times* with family and friends. In fact, because of this, this Christmas may well be one of our best Christmases in recent memory. There's something about *deprivation* and having to count our pennies that is uplifting of the spirit.

I keep reading story after story of adjustments that individuals and families are making now that income is less certain and—everywhere—money is more scarce. For example, employees at one office are taking the money they would normally spend on gifts for one another at the company Christmas party and donating the money to charities that help the poor and less fortunate.

**The Christmas spirit** is born out of an unpretentious birth in a bed of straw in a lowly stable. Most likely, Joseph and Mary were simply doing the best they could to get by—one day at a time. 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 simplicity of that first Christmas, like love reaching out from a bed of straw, deepen our faith and lift our spirit.