

**THE WONDROUS GIFT**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

But when you think about it, what child is not holy? What child is not a child of God? Does any child arrive without the promise of making the world a little brighter—if not the whole world at least one corner of the world?

This week I've had children on my mind. Today we are in between baptisms—one last Sunday; two next Sunday.

Paula's and my twin grand daughters will arrive Tuesday from Albuquerque. In case you hadn't heard, at their birth on September 17th the heavens sang. I'm sorry if you missed it. Maybe you weren't tune into the same wavelength as us.

I can tell you this: parents and grandparents and a host of others fell in love with those two bundles of flesh and bone that would be called Angie and Paula, wondrous gifts, so precious and so fragile. In an instant our hearts filled with joy and—though we dared not say so—our hearts filled with fear as well for we know how harsh and cruel the world can be.

Love is never risk free.

We give our hearts knowing that our hearts will be broken time and time again. Many of us here know the anguish of lives snuffed out too soon. Out of inconsolable grief we often say: *Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.*

Love is never risk free.

Last Sunday we baptized the child of Eddy and Vanessa. You can be sure the heavens sang at her birth as well. Parents and grandparents and a host of others fell in love with a little bundle of flesh and bone that would be called Bianca Maria Herrera DeHope.

Bianca's father Eddy and his mother Maria came to us in 1985 as refugees. Eddy was just four years old. Some of you know the story. Maria and Eddy had fled a reign of terror in Guatemala. Maybe you remember those gruesome years in Central America.

Maria and Eddy's long and treacherous trek was not unlike the long and treacherous trek of Jesus with his parents, fleeing from a reign of terror in their homeland across the border into Egypt. Mary shared the plight of countless other mothers who have shielded their infants, their wondrous gifts, from forces that seek to kill and maim them. The world can be a harsh, dark and cruel place.

And yet we give our hearts knowing that our hearts will be broken time and time again. Love is never risk free.

Eddy and Maria crossed into the United States and were arrested in Southern California, arraigned and sent to a detention center in Laredo, Texas to await deportation. None of us here knew anything about them at the time. Little did we know that during the Advent season of 1984 our hearts were being prepared to receive a gift. Sunday after Sunday during that Advent season, just like this Advent season, we recited the hope of the gospel: *the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.*

Throughout the following season of Lent a small group of us met and prayed every Sunday evening here in the Meeting House learning all we could about our suffering, nameless brothers and sisters below the border. *What, if anything, can we do*, we asked ourselves over and over and over again.

Then one thing led to another to another to another until we were led to John Hazelton, the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Laredo Texas. He himself, we learned, led a Bible study every week in the Laredo detention center for hundreds of detainees. But his heart had gone out to a certain mother and her little son. *O Lord*, he prayed, *please find them a home*.

He was praying in Laredo. We were praying in Shepherdstown. Evidently, there are many ways to say, *let it be*.

Shortly after Easter our congregation took up a special offering for that mother and child. Heaven only knew how much would be given. But when the church treasurer counted it on the spot that morning it was just enough to cover the expenses of their bond and airfare. They arrived in our community in June—a wondrous gift that over the next several years evoked from this parish all the necessary resources to help create a new home in a safe place for them. Maria is now a licensed practical nurse at Canterbury. Eddy graduated from Shepherd and works for Verizon in San Francisco. Both are now American citizens.

There are, as it turns out, many ways to say *let it be*, many ways to say *yes* to the wondrous gifts of the Spirit. Welcoming a little baby is one way; but it's not the only way. Life itself is a wondrous and holy gift. Every moment is a wondrous gift to be received with a humble and grateful heart.

Whether you know it or not, you yourself are a wondrous gift. And whether you know it or not, you mean the world to someone.

That little town of Bethlehem is not just a little town. "Bethlehem" is also your heart where the hopes and fears of all the years gather with a question only you can answer.

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### **O Little Town of Bethlehem**

O little town of Bethlehem,  
How still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin and enter in,  
Be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Emmanuel!