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Advent 3B
Peace, Seattle epk
December 11, 2011
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

O Jesus, we rejoice at the signs that say you are near. Your presence is everywhere, yet our eyes often see only darkness and what has yet to be done. We believe in you, yet when we look around evil seems so strong and goodness so weak. Show us today where the blind see and cripples walk. Give us a sign of your presence. Amen.

THE ONE WHO SHELTERS US

This coming week, in Hispanic communities around our country and throughout Latin America, ***Las Posadas*** will begin. Each night a group of travelers will go from door to door reenacting the story of Joseph seeking lodging with his young wife, Mary, who is heavy with child.

For nine nights in a row, children and grownups assume the identity of the weary couple or of the innkeepers. As Mary and Joseph they process around the neighborhood, moving from one place to the next, knocking on doors and asking for a place to stay.

At each station, an ancient exchange is repeated. Those playing the part of Joseph approach the inn, knock on the door, and say in a loud voice *"En nombre del cielo..."*
"In the name of heaven good people, we are travelers in need of shelter for the night."

From inside, a chorus of voices responds, *"Aqui no es meson sigan adelante..."*
"This is not an inn; move on—I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel."

As the couple moves from one door to the next, the innkeepers grow angry and even threaten violence, while the night grows colder and the young couple's weariness turns to exhaustion.

More and more anxiously, Mary's husband implores: *"Venimos rendidos desde Nazareth..."*
"We are tired traveling from Nazareth; I am a carpenter named Joseph."

Finally, Joseph even reveals his wife's true identity and begs for shelter for just one night but to no avail.

For eight days, the scene is reenacted. Finally, on the ninth day, the eve of Christmas, the travelers knock at a final door.

Their request for shelter moves the heart of an innkeeper, who offers the young couple all that he has left—a stable. The door opens to receive them and a community celebration begins.

In this way, each year, the community enters anew the story of God's hospitality to them in Christ and hears Christ's call to offer the same hospitality to the stranger, the traveler, the refugee, and all who are in need of *"posada"*—shelter.

This morning, as we cross the midpoint of our Advent pilgrimage, the words of Isaiah open up a view toward the world that God is bringing to birth, and it is a world marked by reversals:

- A world where doors open for strangers; where there's good news for broken hearts;
- A world where the captive are freed, fortunes are reversed and past devastations are cleared away to make room for new possibilities.

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This world of renewal and hope often seems to be a good ways off. We might catch a glimpse of it at times, off in the distance, but it is not yet within our experience. Yet our texts this morning tell us that this world is coming into being, and he is coming—Emmanuel; coming in the flesh.

The question, of course, is whether we will have eyes to recognize him when he comes; or whether we, like the innkeepers of Las Posadas, will out of fear, selfishness, or complacency, shut the door and turn our faces away.

It's no coincidence that the opening verses of Isaiah 61 are found five centuries later on the lips of Jesus during his first hometown sermon. That situation, you might recall, ended badly for him. The congregation was so angered by his message that they were ready to hurl him over the cliff.

Bringing "good news to the oppressed" sounds noble in the abstract, but the reality of God's inbreaking into human history exacts a price. We long for welcome, we long for doors to open and for us to be swept out of the cold and dark and into the light, but there are no guarantees that we or the message we bring will be welcomed. *Las Posadas* reminds us that the journey of faith is a journey with uncertain ends.

Not long after Christmas the last US troops in Iraq will board a plane for home. As thankful as we will be to turn the page on that war, we will be living a good long while with the question of whether the cost of the war—in lives and in every other way of measuring—was worth the effort, and whether we are leaving an adequate foundation for peace and democracy as we exit.

In the absence of US troops there, Iraq's presence in the headlines will diminish, but the project of recovery from the devastations wrought by war will continue for the Iraqi people for years—perhaps even generations. We owe the Iraqi people our continuing prayers as they seek to build up, raise and repair their ruined cities, even while we commit ourselves to rehabilitating and restoring to health thousands of U.S. servicemen and women who bear the scars of their service there.

As we enter the final weeks of Advent, with the "to do" list impossibly long, we are invited to hold the song of Isaiah close to our hearts and let its refrain become our own; to look at our lives and our world from a God's-eye view; to listen, in the voices of friend and stranger, for those who need the sheltering presence of God.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, we come as pilgrims, in search of *posadas*—shelter; in search of food to nourish us for our journey. Some of us come eagerly, our lives bursting with possibility. And some of us are travel weary, weighed down with fearful wonderings about what the future holds.

We come to the door and knock, and Christ opens it and bids us enter. He has been expecting us; and has a meal prepared. Here he offers each one of us the very food we need for wholeness and healing, his own body and blood, and through these gifts he shapes us into a community.

And in that offering, in the taking and eating, our vision clears, our ears are unstopped, and we feel our voices rise to sing, in the words of both Isaiah and Mary:

> MY SOUL PROCLAIMS YOUR GREATNESS O GOD AND MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN YOU,
> YOU HAVE LOOKED WITH LOVE ON YOUR SERVANT HERE AND BLESSED ME ALL MY LIFE THROUGH! Amen.