

Christmas Eve, 2016
Fulfillment Center
The Rev. Susan Sommer

I got an email on Wednesday morning, timestamped 10:18, informing me that my order from Amazon had been delivered three minutes earlier to my front door. And behold, it was so. Several boxes shipped from some place called the Fulfillment Center. I had ordered up some presents for Rick on Amazon.com that I couldn't purchase locally and the automated fulfillment center took care of the rest. What I wanted, delivered on time, as promised. Fulfillment.

Wow. And yet, no big deal. That's world we live in now. And yet... I find myself thinking about a very different kind of fulfillment center, in a very different part of the world over 2000 years ago. One that housed two exhausted refugees who had walked 80 hard miles from their village to the north, one of whom was heavily pregnant with her first child. That Mary and Joseph had made this dangerous, inconvenient trip to Bethlehem had to do with what the Emperor Augustus wanted. Luke tells us that he had ordered a census, and in order to fulfill the Emperor's desire, people were forced to travel to their ancestral towns. And though there is no independent record of a census like this ordered by Caesar Augustus, it certainly is consistent with what we know conquering empires do. And that is, find ways to remind the conquered people of who is in charge. The Emperor would likely have been as casual about ordering this census as I was at my computer ordering Christmas presents.

And all the while, the deepest longings of a captive people had gone unfulfilled for centuries. Their kings were little more than puppets controlled by Rome. Their religious leaders were focused on preserving their own privileged status. As always, it was the common, ordinary people whose cries for justice and mercy were unheard and unheeded by those in power.

But God heard. And God heeded.

And in the fullness of time, God fulfilled God's plan of salvation. And not as any of us would likely have arranged it if any of us had been responsible for the business model. The human minds that designed Amazon and UPS tracker would probably have rolled out this fulfillment business differently. Would have kept everyone in the loop better, with less mess, less chaos, and certainly with better publicity. To quote a poem by Madeleine L'Engle,

*That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn –
Yet here did the Savior make his home.*

The stable in Bethlehem was God's version of a Fulfillment Center. God embodied, swaddled in human flesh, born to a peasant couple far from home, lain in a feeding trough. God choosing to experience the fullness of the human condition. God choosing to be cold and hungry, to be held in the unpracticed arms of an exhausted, frightened, first time mom. And choosing to do this, not for his own sake, but for ours.

Which brings me back to my Amazon order. I took responsibility for ordering it, and I got what I wanted when I wanted it. I do it all the time – so much so that it's easy for me to forget how unnatural my world of individual preference and disembodied convenience actually is. We celebrate the values of self-determination and personal responsibility. Sometimes we go through the whole of our lives receiving shipment after shipment, as it were, from one fulfillment center after another. And sometimes, life takes a radical turn. The happily ever after doesn't arrive as ordered. Life intervenes. Hard stuff is delivered instead. We lose a job, a beloved spouse or child dies, serious

illness or addiction issues befall us. And we discover that we are not nearly as much in charge of our lives as we thought we were, or certainly as we wanted to be. That often our closest companion is our own mortality, our own imperfections. Our own humanity.

And yet... on this night we discover anew the gift of the Christ Child, who came to us not because we made it happen, but because God did. And who did it, not on our time table, but in the fullness of time. Who sent his only begotten Son to take upon himself our humanity, which is to say, our human frailty and vulnerability. God with us, born this night, fulfilling God's deepest desire for us.

Again from Madeleine L'Engle:

*When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a star the sky is torn –
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.*

Madeleine L'Engle, "The Risk of Birth," 1973.