

Christmas 2010

Dear Family and Friends:

Kara Grace Ekholm is a perfectly delightful child. She came gift-wrapped (our daughter Jessi might choose different language to describe her labor) on August 20 of this past year. Kara has blossomed into a plump cherub who makes me smile. She is at the stage where everything is a wonder—lights, faces, and sounds of any kind. When I ponder how she will first remember me, I think of Jessi's early drawings of human faces. She made them with two enormous nostrils dwarfing all other features. I suspect my fate will be the same this time around, but I hope there is a smile behind the snout. I especially enjoy Kara's startled reaction when she first awakes. Her arms go straight out as if to receive a gift and her eyes open as wide as saucers. They stay that way for the longest time, striving to take everything in.

I wonder if that is how the shepherds felt that first Christmas night. They must have experienced a startle reaction on steroids when they first beheld the angelic choir. Talk about a wow moment! That backdrop is why I never tire of celebrating Christmas. There is something so startling about the truth that God came to be with us in a unique person. I cannot take that truth even half seriously and stay ho-hum. The season is so full of what the Irish *peregrini*, those missionary monks of another millennium, called "thin spaces."

"Thin spaces" was their way of describing the confluence of attitudes, customs, time, space, and circumstances God breaking into their experience and making Himself manifest. What the *peregrini* prayed, looked, and longed for was to be supernaturally startled in a way that united them as a community of people. They desired their worship to be characterized by an appreciation for the greatness and compassion of God, along with a renewed sense of care for each other.

I experienced a thin space quite unexpectedly last Sunday evening. I was enjoying a performance of the Messiah. Near the end of the Christmas portion of that masterpiece, the alto and soprano soloists share in singing "He Shall Feed His Flock." It is a beautiful piece musically and lyrically, but that is not what got to me. It was those who sang it. The alto was recently and suddenly widowed and left with four children. The soprano was a young mother with three small tots and a husband on a tour of duty in Iraq. The words lingered with such poignancy. "Come to Him, all that labor and are heavy laden, and He shall give you rest. Take His yoke upon you and learn of Him ... and ye shall find rest for your souls." As I looked at the Festival Choir and around the sanctuary, faces stood out. This one had lost a parent, that one a job, that one had just diagnosed with cancer. And we sang or listened and worshipped together. It was a thin space, not centuries ago in the deep forests of central Europe or the rugged foothills of the Alps. It occurred here in an oh-so-formal, neo-Gothic building in Washington D.C.

I write to wish you a wonderful Yuletide and New Year. We are doing well and earnestly hope that you are too. But whether this year was joyous, somber, or ho-hum, may this Christmas be for you a time for thin spaces, for a special inbreak of Him who is the wellspring of life. From our home to yours: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.