

An Open Chair

^{NRS} **Luke 2:1** In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Two years ago I listened to and met Walter Wangerin, a Luthern pastor, teacher, and master story teller. Walter and I have very different backgrounds- although he grew up in Portland, he spent most of his life doing urban ministry in Evansville, Indiana. A lot of his stories only make sense in the gritty, hard world of the inner city. But one he told me made as much sense in my world as in his.

He told me about Odessa, a woman in his church who wasn't able to make it church anymore, who was dying, and wasn't happy about it. In fact she was down right angry about it. He said he also knew he had to be careful when he visited and she had her teeth in- if she had her teeth out that meant she was in a good mood, she would just gum

him, he said. But if she had her teeth in when he stopped by, it's because she wanted him to hear every single syllable of her anger- her anger at what was happening to him, her anger at how she wasn't able to go to church anymore, her anger at God. She was so cut off and apart from everyone. (Make it Christmastime somehow- to link to the next piece.)

The division and separation- this is the Christmas story. (Zechariah, the kids are away from home and alone, the shepherds are alone and cut off from society, and then Mary and Joseph are divided in themselves.)

Walter was frustrated with what he considered his failure with Odessa- he just didn't ever seem to have the right words to make things any better with her. And especially with the busy-ness of the season he stopped seeing her as much. And he felt guilty. Then, when it came time for caroling he started to dread it- because they needed to go see her and he hadn't.

The story

A Christmas miracle happened the very first time too. Zechariah not only started speaking again- but he sang. The kids weren't alone in Bethlehem the shepherds showed up. And Joseph and Mary- I like to think Joseph put his arm around Mary that night, as they watched that tiny, precious little one in front of them, so full of promise, so full of life and joy.

The world around us isn't perfect tonight. Our own lives aren't perfect tonight. We're cut off from each other, sometimes in ways we aren't even feeling anymore. My prayer for us tonight- something about the hope of the Christ child. **Amen.**