

We don't need angels anymore, because now we have CNN to bring us whatever news we might need.

I trust from what little I've seen that they have been covering Christmas exhaustively, with a special emphasis on the profit margins, which are more interesting than marginal prophets.

There has been concern in a wobbly economy about the strength of seasonal retail, phrased in such terrifying questions as, "Are Americans spending enough on Christmas?"

Last weekend's Nor'easter that bludgeoned the East Coast was a huge cause for concern, trapping people in their homes when they should have been out shopping and spending; would the terrible, ill-timed weather ruin Christmas?

This is critical, of course, because last year was so disappointing in the early, fearful wake of a sudden recession.

Last year, Americans only spent 450 billion dollars on Christmas.

This is according to the Advent Conspiracy website, which also notes that the world's water crisis can be solved with 10 billion.

How ironic it would be if the American economy lost ten billion in Christmas sales to an onslaught of too much frozen water.

The suffocating snows did more than jeopardize retail, of course; many exposed to the elements quietly had their very survival imperiled.

Less dramatically, perhaps, a lot of holiday season travel got altered, canceled or compromised.

I say "perhaps" because this is quite an issue for those who are great with child.

A friend of mine in Virginia, whose wife is due in March, spent much of his Saturday afternoon helping to shovel out his neighbor's driveway, because she was due any minute.

Her elderly parents, in from China, came out to say *ni hao!* and wave appreciatively.

Neither they nor anyone else wanted their daughter to be unable to get to the hospital when the time came for her to be delivered.

Shovel in hand, my friend was part of a cross-cultural team determined to make sure that Christmas did not happen again.

As with anything so familiar, be it an old spouse or a beloved story, it becomes hard to hear and see and absorb the startling edge of this Christmas gospel, which has a pregnant teenager on the run to distant family before coming home to a fiancé who can't possibly be happy with her before both of them have to travel back to a distant hometown they probably had good reason to leave just because the government said so.

And *while they were there*, of course, in backwater Bethlehem, the water breaks and the inn is full and there's no hospital or health care reform or kind neighbor to help...*while they were there*, with nothing but an animal trough for an incubator and cloth strips for blankets and musty straw for cushioning, then it is, *there* it is that the baby is born.

And isn't that in fact the good news of great joy, the wild comfort of Christmas: that God does not wait for us to get our act together to arrive?

For all our Advent crying and trying to *prepare the way of the Lord*, the driveway isn't shoveled and neither is the manure when the holy child comes.

Christ does not wait for us to clear a path either in the snows or in our frozen, overfull hearts. Life and promise and joy break in on us when we are not ready for them, which may be why we schedule Christmas on the same date every year, to give ourselves the illusion that God will fit into our plans rather than crash land into our chaos in need of a diaper we don't have.

Christmas happens, if you ask Mary and Joseph, at the worst possible moment, on the road, alone with just your thoughts and each other, in the company of babbling strangers, in the early winter's night behind the *no vacancy* sign, in a blizzard of worry and confusion and first time parents and second guesses.

And in spite of the struggle and strangeness of it all, and maybe in part because of it, the ill-timed child with his perfect timing brings together the unlikeliest combinations.

Look around this room; there is no way to speak of how many people had to travel to make this evening's unusual candlelight community possible.

So many people had to travel here, and so many other people had to travel away.

This gathering looks almost nothing like our usual Sunday morning crowd; it's a fleeting and strange and sacred communion we share.

It could only be the work of the one we long for and prepare for but end up finding in the oddest of places and times, like a snow-packed driveway half a world away or the feedbox out back.

It is a sign and a celebration of the miracle of Christmas, which brings together pregnant Mary and righteous Joseph, which brings together a barnyard menagerie and a maternity ward, which brings together all the host of heaven with a handful of hillside shepherds, which brings together travelers and shepherders and angels and cattle, which brings together heaven and earth, human and divine, skin and sky.

And in order to accomplish all this bringing together, Christmas makes those of us who are unwitting or unlucky or daring enough to be a part of it get up and go.

It makes us travel, a long and often difficult way:

from Nazareth to Bethlehem...

from the country to the town...

from the pasture to the stable...

from the heavens to the hillside...

from halfway around the world...

from the house to the hospital...

from shopping malls to life-saving wells...

from the head to the heart...

from resentment and dread to forgiveness and a fresh start...

from cynicism to hope...

from politics to peace...

from fear all the way to joy.

That, of course, is the rigorous, perilous, pregnant, frustrating, fearful and wonderful journey of life that is the story of Christmas come true in ever new and bizarre and beautiful ways.

God is moving yesterday's shepherds and today's consumers on the long and twisting way from fear to joy.

The ride is slow and bumpy to be sure.

There are sheep underfoot and conflicts with companions.

There are shooting pains and closed doors.

Schedules and plans and reservations are rarely honored on odysseys of the soul.

Yet God does not wait for us to get our stable swept or our sheep in line to be with us.

Maybe it's because God is tired and needs to sleep, even if it is in a manger or an unwed mother's arms.

Who is picky after a long journey?

God, you see, has come a very long way to reach us.