

Drawn to the Light
A sermon by Joe Hoffman
January 6, 2008

Sometimes it is important to tell our story. And today that is what I want to do.

On New Year's Eve, last Monday, I got a call from Meeghan, who is with us today, and someone I met when she participated in the Room in the Inn program at our church several months ago. She has stayed in touch with us since, and sometimes comes by the church to help out. She called to ask if there was any way that she and a friend could stay in the church on New Year's Day – because all the agencies helping people who are on the streets would be closed – as would all public buildings and even the buses. And it was to be a very cold and blustery day.

I must admit that I didn't want to get involved at first. I wanted to take the day off. I didn't want any responsibilities for that day. But I agreed to do some checking around and invited her to call me back later in the day.

I made some calls to the agencies that work with the homeless and discovered that they would all be closed. I checked the weather report and discovered it would be cold and maybe even snowing as the temperature dropped throughout the day. I knew that when it is cold like that, I don't even like to go out and walk the dog – and certainly would not want to be outside all day.

But I still hesitated.

As the day went on, I took a walk and prayed about it. I began to want to help. But there were so many practical concerns. I didn't know how many of you might be able to come and help at such late notice. I thought some of you might think I was crazy. I had no plan, no details worked out. I just knew we could open the building and provide a warm space.

And I didn't know if anyone from the streets would come. As I sorted through all of this, I again tried to convince myself that there really wasn't a need, that I could just let this go.

But I knew better. And I knew I did not want to start my new year's day knowing that people were walking our city streets cold and with no place to go for warmth, food, or a bathroom. I knew that with your help we could make something happen, and that's when I knew I had to do that.

So I called Kathryn Cartledge. I wanted to have at least one partner in this scheme. And I knew she brought experience and knowledge that I didn't have. When she agreed immediately to help, I knew this was going to work. We talked about my buying some food for sandwiches, etc. And we agreed to meet the next morning. That was all of the plan we had.

I quickly typed up a note to the congregation and sent it to Ed McFadden, asking him to get it out as fast as he could. And I went ahead and sent that note to some of you knowing that I needed to reach you as fast as I possibly could.

It was about 5pm when I realized – I had not invited our homeless friends to come. I had made this decision, sent the email to you, but now – maybe it was too late. I was driving home as this reality struck. So I turned around and quickly came to the church to make a handwritten flyer to post wherever I could. I then drove to 3 shelters and passed them out. At the Rescue Mission, I was able to actually make the announcement as people were eating. And their response was startling. They smiled and thanked me. Some came up and volunteered to help. Others brought a map and said – can you show me how to get there.

That's when I really knew that we were doing something important – and that people would come. And it all began with our friend Meeghan calling to let me know of the need. That phone call is what made it possible for us to provide shelter for over 100 people on new year's day.

When Hal and Donna arrived at 7am, there were already half a dozen people ready to come in. Janet Stephens and Mark Kurdys arrived shortly thereafter and helped get things ready too. By the time I arrived a little after 7:30, we already had 12 –15 folk wanting to come in. The numbers grew through the morning. People would come in and out, but very few left. Kathryn Cartledge knew there were more out there needing help, so she got in her car and drove around – inviting people to come. She brought several loads of people. There were a few who were reluctant to come with her. So Kathryn took Jayne English – who was helping us in the kitchen – and Jayne who knew many of these folk was able to strengthen the invitation so that they would come.

In the meantime, many of you were coming. Some of you learned about this on Monday late afternoon – others did not receive the email until the early morning hours of the new year – due to the way the internet works. And still you came. You came with food, with extra coats, with games, with family, with a generous and eager spirit. You came.

I was amazed as I watched you all. Amazed at what I could have never planned myself. Amazed at the generosity and the love that was being shared. Amazed at how easy it seemed for all of us to talk and visit with each other. One person confessed that this was out of his comfort zone, but yet he was here. Working hard. Learning to extend the comfort zone.

All day it was like this. Everybody pitching in to help. When we needed something, somehow it was provided. When we realized that most of our guests had had nothing for breakfast, Janet ran to the store and bought eggs and grits and oatmeal. Chris and Martha Stockwell-Goering and Noel Nickle brought movies to show. A man asked me if there was anywhere he could get a hat to stay warm – and Leslie Boyd brought down the collection of hats and gloves and scarves we had been collecting in the narthex. Later someone asked Beaver Wyatt about a blanket to use outside – and Beaver made a call, took Emma Townes and Emma Claire Hoffman with her – and next thing I know my

phone was ringing and Emma Claire was saying – dad, don't let anyone leave yet. We have a car full of blankets, coats, clothes and all sorts of things.

Those are just a few examples. I marveled at what was happening – and I realized – this is what I have wanted for us – to be a city church where we can invite the public in – not to just help them – but to be community together. I daresay that those of us from this church who came to help received as much or more than anyone else. I could not have imagined that we would do this on such short notice and so well. I had visions in fact of it just being 3-4 of us trying to do something – or maybe 50 from the church and 4-5 from the streets. There were so many ways that it could have been a hard day. But look what happened.

I don't know what it means. I think it was an epiphany for me. I think God was in our midst. I think Christ was among us. I think the spirit of life was moving all around.

Epiphanies are not planned. They happen. God breaks through whatever is in the way and does a new and wondrous thing. God breaks through the hesitation. God breaks through the power systems that stand in the way. In the text from Matthew, God found a way to cause Herod to call a Bible study to figure out where this baby king was to be born. The magi didn't know where they were going. They were following a star. That was their pathway to the holy. But they needed help. And of all places to get it – they got it from the one who considered himself to be King of the Jews. Amazing how things work.

We are fortunate that Leslie Boyd came by and wrote up a story, and that Bruce Steel perhaps helped to get the story on the front page of the paper. That is not why we did this. It is nice, though, that the story could be told. As a result of that, we have received \$1200 this week from people outside the church thanking us for what we have done. Wanting to help us pay for that and whatever else we may choose to do. On Thursday a woman walked in and handed Judy a check – she was Florida. Never seen her before. Thanked us – felt called to come and give us something. When she left Judy opened the check – it was for \$1000.

And on Friday, I received in the mail a card from Meeghan and Ginny – thanking me for what we did. And then there was a second card – and it was signed by most of the friends who came on Tuesday to stay warm. We will post it on the bulletin board downstairs so you can see it.

And – on Tuesday night – as we were finishing up here – I got a call from someone at the Rescue Mission – and he said – the men have returned and they are so grateful. They are fired up. They really appreciated what you did today.

Friends, I cannot think of a better way to start the new year. I am proud of you. I am so grateful for you. I don't know what this means to us. I don't know what we do next. But that is what I want to ask you to think about. What does this mean? How does it help to shape our vision for this congregation in this new location? What does this moment say to us?

God worked a wonderful thing through us on Tuesday. God worked in Meeghan to have her make the call. God worked in me to break down my hesitation and resistance to spend my new year's day working. God worked in each of you who responded. God is among us. And the good news is in us. We are called to spread the news to all the ends of Earth. We started that on Tuesday. What else can and will we do?

I can't wait to see!

Amen