



**WISCONSIN  
CONFERENCE**  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

## **Christmas Eve 1992**

*by Rev. Joanne Thomson*

On December 20, 1992, I offered the benediction after morning worship at Middleton Community Church, changed into traveling clothes, and headed off for the bus to O'Hare and the start of my 24 hour-long trip to Asunción, Paraguay. In Asunción, I'd pick up my infant daughter Jessie, visit the US Embassy, and head back to the airport for the return trip to the United States. This would be the culmination of a long adoption process, which had led us through many bureaucratic tangles in both the US and Paraguay.

My husband and I had first met Jessie in the fall, when we'd gone to Asunción to complete the Paraguayan side of the adoption process. Things had not gone as planned, however. What was supposed to be a visit of several weeks turned into an open-ended stay as the legal process stalled, and we were forced to return to Wisconsin, leaving Jessie behind in her foster home. After a wait that seemed endless, we learned that our adoption had been finalized, and that Jessie could come home in December. Because I am the parent in our family who is an American citizen—my husband is not a US citizen—it fell to me to make the trip. My husband would stay behind with our one-year-old son.

The trip was an adventure, to say the least. The anxiety over getting all of the documentation right. The interview at the US Embassy. The language barrier—at the time I spoke hardly a word of Spanish. It's hard enough to go through an emotional legal process, but to do so in a language you don't speak is especially stressful. I'm not too proud to say that tears came to my eyes when the pilot announced at 4am on Christmas Eve morning that the lights ahead of the plane were Miami and that we would land in the United States soon. We still had to navigate the border and immigration, but we were almost there. From Miami we caught a flight to Chicago, where my husband met us for the drive back to Wisconsin. And at 7:00pm that night, on Christmas Eve, I was in the pulpit at Middleton Community Church. I give all the credit for my ability to stand upright at that point to Diet Coke.

These memories came back to me this past Sunday in church, listening to the Scripture passage that tells the story of Mary and Joseph making the journey to Bethlehem, the story that foreshadows their future flight to Egypt with their infant son. Even at the time, I had recognized the symbolism of my journey, a journey that ended on Christmas Eve of

all days! It almost seems too corny to be real. Of course I've always known that my trip in 1992 was eased by all manner of modern conveniences—airplanes, a baby stroller, and disposable diapers. But the feelings of anxiety, disorientation, vulnerability to a bureaucracy that could and did change the rules for no apparent reason, the endless wait for a distant authority to resolve the fate of our child—all of these feelings have made that Biblical story particularly significant to me. It is one more example of how the depth of meaning in the Bible is made real through our human experience.

One episode in our story in particular resonated for me in church on Sunday. When our adoption could not be finalized that fall, we had had to return our daughter to her foster home. We trusted and hoped that all would be well, but we had no idea when we would be reunited. I will never forget handing Jessie back to her foster mother. Jessie's foster mother was a wonderful woman, who showered love on the babies in her care. But to be separated from my child was probably the hardest thing that I've ever lived through.

Maybe more than at any other time of year, the Scripture passages that we read during Advent and Christmas raise memories for us, return us to the past and the loved ones with whom we have shared Christmas over the years. That's certainly true for me. But this year, because of my own powerful memories, Scripture has also centered me in the present: in stories of children separated from their mothers; of families navigating bureaucracy and borders; of parents who want to offer hope to their children and who live with disorientation, uncertainty, and anxiety.

I pray that you may find the story of Jesus alive today, in the Christmas gospel this year.