

Reading the Christmas Story in the Old Death Chamber

Working in prison often calls for thinking on your feet, developing a lesson plan at the last minute and forever dealing with the unknown and unexpected on a regular basis. A month ago, in early December, I was rushing to get ready for my day at Stateville where I'd be teaching my usual Tuesday morning class. I learned early that day that the office I share with a gracious IDOC employee who allows me to store my teaching supplies while I'm at the prison would remain locked until later that morning. My lesson plans for my class were in that office. I would have to come up with something quick. Still at home, I grabbed my Bible and Xeroxed the Christmas story from Luke chapter 2. This was not the lesson I had originally planned for that day but it would work.

I arrived at the prison and passed through the 4 security check points and walked over to X House. I proceeded to the room where I teach, the old death chamber. X House is a smaller housing unit where executions took place years ago but no longer. The actual death chamber, recently renovated, serves as classroom space for the men housed in that unit. Together we read the story of the birth of a baby born to a teen ager in a most humble setting "because there was no room for them in the inn." This baby would become the change the world so desperately needed. This baby would bring light, life, joy and hope to all humanity, changing the course of world events, bringing miracles of healing and eternal life to all. I realized the irony. Here we were, reading about the Son of God being born among us while sitting in the former death chamber where the lives of men had ended. I listened to my students reading and thought about the sheer terror and death that took place within these walls. The contrast of darkness and light, sadness and joy, life and death were most apparent, this really was "Emmanuel, God with us," playing out in that space.

We ended the story and spoke about a little human baby yet Son of God who would forever change humanity and our lives. Emmanuel, God with us, then and now!

Peace+

Deaconess Lori Wilbert