

Christmas Eve/Day, Yr. B

December 24/25, 2020

Luke 2:1-14, 15-20

Once again, we gather and hear this beautiful and miraculous story. The idea, expressed both here and again in John's gospel, that God comes as a child, born for us, or as John puts it, THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH AND DWELLS AMONG US, is the core teaching of Christianity. It's not just a sweet story about something that happened more than 2000 years ago. It's a truth, set out for all people, for all time.

How do we phrase this truth? Sometimes it's said that the Incarnation means that all matter is suffused with spirit, or we can say that because of this Incarnation, there is no place where God is not. Or that God is at home in the Universe, or simply, Emmanuel, God with us.

I've already preached the gospel for this coming Sunday, when we hear those awesome, magnificent words from John. It's been said that what we hear tonight from Luke is the story, but what we hear from John is the significance of that story. In the light that Christ brings into the world, we understand some things. Daniel Berrigan puts it this way:

"We know that:

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss. THIS is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction. THIS is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world. THIS is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted before we can be peacemakers. THIS is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men and women shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity, of peace, are not meant for this earth and for this history. THIS is true: The hour comes and it is now, that the true worshippers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage, that Jesus Christ is the light of the world. That is the vision of the Incarnation, first set out in the creation and reiterated at this birth in Bethlehem.”

It’s also true, amazingly enough, that God wants us to participate in bringing those visions to reality. And just as Gabriel visited Mary and invited her to give birth to Jesus, the Christ, so God invites each and every one of us to do the same. We are asked to give birth to Christ in our time and place. We will be having, or have already had, depending on when you are listening to this, a couple of services of hymn singing. One of those hymns is O Little Town of Bethlehem. Because of constraints of weather on the one hand and time limitations on the other, we didn’t sing all the verses. But the last verse in the hymn says this: O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.

Let’s think about that image: Christ being born in us. What has to happen for that to become reality? I’m thinking of the line in Luke

where he says that when Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem, there was no room for them in the inn. I remember when I first came to St. Luke's, I believe it was Suzanne Crager who told the story of her nephew who had been picked to play the part of the innkeeper in the Christmas pageant. He knew his lines well enough, but he was agonizing over the fact that he was going to have to turn Mary and Joseph away. He was so upset about the whole thing that his parents were anxious about how he would manage. Well, the big moment came. Mary and Joseph knocked at the door of the inn. He opened the door, they asked whether they could have a room and he said, "I'm so sorry, the inn is full, but would you like to come in for a cocktail?" I must say that I love that story and think that it's quite typically an Episcopal story!

So the first thing is to make room – in our heads, and in our hearts. Making room in our heads first: hearing the story, recognizing what God is doing in our world, SEEING first of all that vision. And then, making room in our hearts. As we all know, intellectual knowledge is great and necessary, but without that knowledge somehow penetrating to our hearts, nothing is going to happen. Our heart is the place where we understand in a different way, where we can empathize, where we can be empowered, motivated, encouraged, where the Holy Spirit can touch and inspire us. And after that then, our hands. It's been said that Christ has no hands and feet today except ours. Giving birth to Christ in our world requires thoughtful and prayerful action.

On a very local note, thinking of all this, I attended the house blessing for the Marvin family last week. It was the perfect example of someone having a vision, in this case, Millard and Linda Fuller, who started the Habitat for Humanity ministry, and then followed through with the heart and hands pieces to make Habitat a reality. In this immediate case, though, that vision and that motivation were present in all those

who devoted their hands to the project. I don't know how many people were ultimately involved, but there were donors of land and money, volunteers from throughout the peninsula, people who wielded hammers and made lunches. There were donations of books and beautiful hand-make quilts. It all came together in a celebration of life and love, cooperation and care, that was a perfect example of giving birth to the vision of Christ.

And finally, one more Christmas story, because we can never have too many. This one is told by a man named Robert Smith, remembering a first snowfall from one of the years of his boyhood. He was really eager to get out in the snow and play. Just as he was about to do so, his mom came home from the grocery store and called him over to help her. When they finished unloading the groceries, she said, "Bob, here are Mrs. Hildebrand's groceries." No other instructions were necessary because for as long as he could remember, his mother had shopped for Mrs. Hildebrand's groceries and he had delivered them. She was very elderly and lived alone, was crippled with arthritis and couldn't get out. Bob said that he liked her; she had wonderful stories about her life, about a steepled church in the woods and horse and buggy rides on Sunday afternoons. She always gave him a dime for bringing in the groceries. It got so that he would refuse but only half-heartedly, knowing that she would insist and five minutes later, he'd be across the street at the candy store. This day he had decided he wouldn't accept any money from her. It was close to Christmas and this would be his present to her. When he went in, he put everything on the table more hurriedly than usual because he could hear the snow calling him back outside. She sat at the table and told him where to put everything. He said he usually enjoyed this but today he really wanted to be done. But as she talked, he said that he began to realize how lonely she was. She was a widow and had no children. There was a nephew but he never

visited. No one even called her on Christmas. There was no tree, no presents, no stocking. “She offered me a cup of tea, which she did every time I came. Well, I thought, maybe the snow could wait a bit. So we sat and talked about Christmases past. About an hour went by and she said that I must be wanting to get out in the snow to play. She reached for her purse, but I insisted that I wasn’t going to take any money and that she should use it for more important things. ‘Why,’ she said, ‘what could be more important than giving this money to a friend at Christmas?’ So I took it and hurried over to the candy store. But then I spotted a Christmas card with an old country church on the front, just like the one she talked about going to when she was a girl. I knew I had to buy it. When I handed over my quarter, the store owner asked if the card was for my girlfriend. I started to say no but then I thought, Yeah, I guess it is. And when I went back and gave Mrs. Hildebrand that card, I felt like I had just hit a home run. Her hands trembled when she took the card, she opened the envelope and studied it and then began to cry. ‘Thank you. Thank you so very much,’ she said in almost a whisper.

She died a few weeks later. My mom told me that she had died peacefully in her sleep. Her night table light was still on when they found her and it illuminated a solitary Christmas card with an old country church on the cover.”

A simple gesture of love. A young boy giving birth to Christ. Amen.