

The Christmas Story

Incarnate Joy

We have “journeyed with joy” for many weeks now and here we are, ready to meet joy in the flesh and needing to be reminded that joy has been with us all along; joy is born into the world and into us again and again. We have been enjoying a series on Joy and focusing on the song of heaven and nature. Every familiar reading we heard tonight is full of movement: the feet upon the mountains, shepherds and angels coming and going, God breaking in. It’s a story that we connect with because it is earth, gritty, real and tragic and beautiful. In all the noise and movement of the scriptures, as people joyfully celebrate all that God is and all God has done I sometimes wonder: is anyone tending to the one(s) who bore this joy into the world? Who is tending to the mother of God?

Meitster Eckhart wrote “We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then is the fullness of time. When the Son of God is begotten in us.” Each one of us gathered is called tonight to come to the stable ready to be transformed by hope, love, peace and joy.

There is a deepening of the silence that normally accompanies the reading of this Scripture, an increased attentiveness, an air of heightened expectation. Perhaps it is the solemnity of the evening, as we gather, candles in hand, to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. Perhaps it is the weight of tradition, aware that we listen to passages Christians have heard for centuries. But perhaps it is also the breathtakingly simple yet surprisingly powerful story of a young girl giving birth to her first child, attended only by shepherds and stable animals but heralded by angels above.

By all rights, of course, it’s a story that should not even have been noticed, let alone told again and again across millennium. After all, countless young girls gave birth that night and we remember none of them. Interestingly, the “smallness” of Mary’s story is set off by Luke’s narrative setting: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus... while Quirinius was governor.” Emperors and governors are apt subjects for dramatic narratives; unwed teenage mothers and their vulnerable babes are not. Yet Luke locates this simple story amid the powers and principalities of the age to make a claim: The child born to this young mother will change the course of history, and the fates of leaders and common folk alike hang in the balance of his destiny.

I suspect that, on one level, we’ve forgotten just how audacious, if not downright outlandish, Luke’s claim is. So accustomed to the slow and graceful reading of this passage, we may miss the irony of setting newborn beside emperor as if the two could possibly have anything to do with one another. At a deeper level, however, I have a hunch that we do recognize something of the

absolute, even absurd vulnerability of Mary and her child, and that their very vulnerability may be a large part of what moves us.

Few of us, after all, have much experience with anything miraculous, be it the relatively small-scale miracle of turning water into wine or the grand event of resurrection that this humble beginning leads to. Yet the vulnerability of a newborn? The fear and hope bundled together in the heart of his mother? These are things we have felt in spades.

Many of us have gathered here tonight with trepidation, with worries that are raw and real, wondering how we will get through the week, how we will pay our bills, how we will solve our relational struggles. Many of us have come overshadowed by illness or filled with foreboding about the safety of a loved. The simple truth of the matter is that each and all of us, whether dressed in our holiday best or not, have been indelibly marked by the everyday hardships of this life and so we are well acquainted with the sheer frailty of these unlikely lead characters. We instinctively feel for them, and each Christmas we are simultaneously surprised, humbled, and encouraged to hear the promise that God is at work through them for us.

We come as characters in this story we are like the shepherds called from their fields. At the bottom of the socio-economic world of first-century Palestine, the shepherds have no right, no expectation, no hope in the world of being touched by the divine. Little wonder, then, that they are terrified by the appearance of the heavenly host. (It isn't too much to wonder if perhaps they obey only because they can think of no other response to the angelic summons. "Let us now go...") And so they run to the stable, stumble upon the tender -- scene of this mother and child and wonder what on heaven or earth they have seen. They tell others what they've witnessed -- what else can you do when you've been touched by the divine? -- and all are amazed by what has happened.

Here is the promise of Christmas. God dwells not with the high and mighty, but with the lowly, the unexpected, those considered "nothing" by this world. And here, amid the weakness and vulnerability of human birth, God makes God's intentions for humanity fully known. God is love, as God takes human form, the infinite becomes finite, and that which is imperishable becomes perishable.

If God can work in and through such ordinary characters, we are bid to wonder, perhaps God can also work in and through us. Luke wants, I think, to make sure we realize that it is not just human flesh "in general" that God takes on in Christ; it is our flesh. And it is not simply history "in general" that God enters via this birth, it is our history and our very lives to which God is committed.

This story of long ago is not only about angels and shepherds, a mother and her newborn. It is also about us, all of us gathered amid the candles and readings, carols and prayers. God came at Christmas for us, that we might have hope and courage amid the dark and dangerous times and places of our lives. This, in the end, is why we gather, so that as God entered into time and history so long ago through the Word made flesh, God might also enter our lives even now through the Word proclaimed in Scripture, song.

This story is about us also being in this story and ushering in unabashed joy. So as you go from here this Christmas night ask yourself Where is Christ breaking into your world today? Where does joy seep into our lives? The Lord is Come! The whole of creation praises God: the heavens

are glad, the earth rejoices, seas roar, fields exult, trees in the forest sing for joy! As we go from here and this Holy Holy Night may we experience Christ birth in our lives and may we also go from here bringing love, peace, hope and joy to all the world.

Amen