

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 98  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve B  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
December 24, 2017  
The Rev. Karen Haig

### Joining Heaven and Earth

Just east of Bethlehem, outside the town of Beit Sahur there are rugged stone fields covered in scraggly brush and olive trees. Tumbled down stone walls appear here and there, and if you look very closely at the hillsides, you'll see a cave. And then another. And then another and another. It's a little like spotting stars when daylight turns to dusk... first one, then another, then another and suddenly there are more than you can count. These are the hillsides around Shepherd's Field, that region where the shepherds were watching over their flocks on that magical night more than two thousand years ago. It's easy to be sentimental about those shepherds, imagining them as the little statues in our creches, with sweet baby lambs slung over their shoulders, kneeling at the foot of the manger.

But looking out over those rocky hillsides, watching today's shepherds herding their sheep, all that sentimentality falls away. You see, the shepherds who watch over their flocks these days really aren't so different from those shepherds long ago... covered with sweat and grime, living in caves with their animals in the back, more or less isolated from the rest of society. Shepherds in Jesus' time were looked down on as the lowest of the low, only slightly better than common criminals. Yet who were the first ones chosen to receive the good news of great joy? Those raggedy shepherds in the fields! "To you," said the angel, "to *you* is born, this very day, the Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

What kind of a God would make shepherds—the lowest of the low—the first to know the mystery of the incarnate God, baby Jesus? Why not the important people? For that matter, what kind of God would submit to the limitations and all the messiness of the human condition, to live and die as one of us? It would have to be a God of infinite compassion, and one with a healthy dose of curiosity. It is the God who was revealed in Bethlehem on that magical night so long ago, and the God who is revealed to us this magical night too.

I know that for some of us, Jesus is only alive in the stories from thousands of years ago. He comes alive lying in a manger or walking down dusty roads in ancient towns. He comes alive on the shores of the Sea of Galilee where he calls fishermen to leave their nets and their boats and their families for a life of discipleship. Or he comes alive when surrounded by squabbling scribes and Pharisees, heartsick widows and moneychangers in the temple. Alive in the stories, we say. Good stories too, stories that have something to teach us. But stories that are old and tired and not much like our lives.

For some of us, Jesus was alive more recently than that, maybe in our grandmother's house when everyone always sat down to Sunday supper, and no one ever ate without saying grace. A

place where cross-stitched bible verses hung on the wall of the guest room where we slept when we stayed overnight, and dressed up in the morning to go to church.

For others of us, Jesus lives in the future, in the world of eternal life, in heaven where we hope and pray we will all live happily ever after, the place where there will at last, be peace. And still for others, Jesus is of little consequence. These people live in a world where being “self-made” is preferable to being created in the image and likeness of God, a world where people truly believe there is nothing more than what they can think or prove or buy, and where the object of worship is nothing more than the self and everything it wants.

But in this place, on this night, Jesus is not in the past. His birth is not a distant or fading memory. On this night Jesus is born in us, a reality which we make present in story and song and sacrament. Tonight we live inside the sacred story; and tonight it begins to live inside us.

Do you know that St. Francis liked to invite everyone at the Christmas Eve mass to bray and moo like the animals who stood round baby Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem? He wanted everyone to feel that they were there, in the cave with the Holy Family, because he knew that baby Jesus - God in human form - the Incarnation of Christ - isn't something way back in the past. It's right here in the present tense. When we hear the Nativity story, we don't just remember it. We participate in it. *We are a part of it.*

We can go even further, you know, because as it turns out, the Incarnation of the divine in human flesh isn't just something we *see when we look into the manger*. God incarnates in us too, and that is what we're reminded of this night. That magical night in Bethlehem is this night on our little island, when God comes, not just to be with us, but to be one of us.

Maybe you feel like Mary when the Angel Gabriel told her that she would become pregnant with God. Maybe you too are asking “How can this be?” How can my life, my story be the place where God comes to dwell? How, indeed? It is an amazement, a wonder, a mystery. It isn't something to comprehend, you know, it's something we experience. God incarnates in us, we are the place God chooses to dwell and to make God's self known to the world. That is precisely what God is up to tonight, and tomorrow, and always and forever until the end of time.

We aren't shepherds or angels or Marys, but we don't need to be... the reason they were and are so important is because they were the truth of themselves and didn't try to be anything other than that. God came to the shepherds, God came to Mary, God comes to us. God comes to us. That first Christmas was not easy for the Holy Family... and yet it was into that beautiful and messy and holy and vulnerable place that God chose to be born. What could possibly be more vulnerable than a homeless teenage mother birthing a child into the cold night air in a cave full of animals? And what could be stronger than the Love that shone in that darkest night?

My dears, the good news of Christmas is this: The infinite God, the Creator of time and space and everything that ever was or is or is to come, this God, the God whose name is love, longs to

be born in us, in your life, my life, our common life as the body of Christ. We are God's Bethlehem tonight.

What happened in Bethlehem on that magical night so long ago could never be contained. The love that was born that night is so big, so strong, so bright that it couldn't help but go out into all the world, all the people, all the places, now and forever.

When we've sung our last *Gloria*, when the angels disappear, when our pilgrimage to the Christ Child has ended, the shepherds will return to their flocks, and we will return to our homes. But we will not be the people we were when we came here. We have gazed on the face of Love incarnate tonight, we have begun to let that love be born in us tonight, and nothing, nothing in the whole wide world will ever be the same.

Amen.