

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
December 24, 2018
The Rev. Karen Haig

Too Wonderful For Words

Beloved in Christ, be it this Christmastide our care and delight to hear again the message of the angels, and in heart and mind to go even to Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, and the Babe lying in a manger.¹

There is something too wonderful for words happening this night, and still in heart and mind we try to take it all in. On this night thousands of years ago, heaven and earth met in a stable in Bethlehem when a precious baby boy was born and the world was forever changed.

We've spent the last few weeks, or we've tried to, preparing for this night, watching and waiting and longing for the love that comes to us each Christmas time, trying, when we remember, to make some space for quiet so that every heart can prepare him room. That isn't so easy to do when the strains of "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas," "Jingle Bells" and "Santa Baby" have been ringing in our ears since Halloween. It's not easy when we're besieged with marketers marketing, sellers selling, advertisers advertising and shoppers shopping. Some of us have been hustling and bustling, running back and forth picking people up from the ferry, planning menus, hosting parties, going to parties, cooking, cleaning, shopping and wrapping. The "holiday season" can feel stressful and chaotic and even crazy-making as we try to do all of the things we've decided we need to do, trying hard not to disappoint anyone or to be too disappointed ourselves. In this season we find our emotions are heightened and sometimes our tensions are too. We feel deeply at Christmas time, don't we?

That's natural, you know. And now, we are here. All of the hard work, all of the sweet intentions, all of the things done and left undone are either done or undone and we are finally here tonight in this beautiful, gentle, peaceful place. Now is the time to come away from the cacophony of the world and to rest in the God who loves you. To sink into the unspeakable wonder of God come down from heaven not just to be with us, but to be one of us. Now is the time to remember that the God whose name is love has come among us to show us how dearly beloved we are, to show us that love is the law and that no matter how things appear, God is at work in everything and everything – absolutely everything gets redeemed.

It's hard, sometimes, to see how love wins in a world where children are starving, where elders are homeless, where poverty breeds hopelessness, where refugees are not taken in. Jesus was born into a world very much like that, and in very meager circumstances of his own. It's hard to imagine what the Emperor of the world or the Governor of Syria have to do with an unwed teenaged girl giving birth to her firstborn child in some stable in a tiny town in Palestine, yet

¹ Bidding prayer for the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols for Christmastide

Augustus and Quirinius are right there at the very beginning of the story. This is important information for us. It shows us that from the very beginning, the ones who seem to wield all the power are not actually the ones with the power, or at least the power they have is not what ultimately will change the world. As it turns out, the whole wide world was changed when an unwed Palestinian teenager gave birth, in a stable, to a little baby boy. Because in that baby boy, heaven and earth, divine and human, love and more love was born.

That's the simple truth you know. Even in the bleakest times, even in the most dubious circumstances, and especially in the most unlikely people, God shows up. It's hard to believe that God would be paying attention to some young unwed mother when the whole world seemed to be falling apart –horrendous political manipulation, unspeakable greed, cruel power-mongering and a complete lack of civil public discourse were the conditions Jesus was born in to. And in all that turmoil, God actually noticed that one seemingly unimportant young woman, and invited her to be the God-bearer for the whole wide world. That's just exactly how God is, you know. No matter what our circumstances might be, God notices and loves each and every one of us very specifically and very particularly. And that means God shows up for us, too.

You see, what happened in that stable in Bethlehem wasn't a one-time event. God wasn't born once and that was that. God – the God of everything that ever was or is or will be does not turn away from any of our human messiness, quite the contrary. That stable in Bethlehem, filled with animals doing what animals do, and only his mother, adoptive father and a bunch of smelly shepherds around? THAT is where God was born. And God continues to be born in those sorts of places more than two thousand years later. This God who loves us with absolute abandon, wants to be with us no matter where we are – in the most joyous and even in the hardest and messiest places we find ourselves.

This God loves us so much that God became one of us, because God became fully human in Jesus, God came to know our joys, our heartaches, our hopes and our dreams, our suffering and delight. The God whose name is love took all of our humanity into God's own heart and is loving all of us, each and every one, right here, right now, and for always. The God born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, the God who is being born in each of us tonight is the God whose name and purpose and being is love. There are some who have been told of a God of judgment, a God of wrath, a God who keeps score, who punishes the bad people and rewards the ones who behave. But that is not the God I know. When God came in to the world in the human baby Jesus, God came to people who might have been well behaved but they certainly weren't important, weren't people who had been particularly punished or rewarded or who had accomplished great things.

Do you see why that matters? It means that God is for everyone, everywhere and that the message of Christmas is love for all of creation. God's love is so deep, so rich, so broad that no one can possibly be left out. God's love was born into some pretty messy circumstances in that stable and God's love continues to be born in whatever messy circumstances we find ourselves in too. God loves all of us, especially when we feel unlovable, because that's when we need love the most.

Dear ones, my prayer this Christmas Eve is that you will all know yourselves to be utterly beloved of God. I pray that the message of Christmas – the good news that God is love, that God is always with us, that God never gives up on us, that God will go to any lengths to be with us will embed itself deeply in your hearts. This God of love, this God of absolutely everything from before the beginning until long beyond the end, came from heaven to be with you. You are God's treasure and so is the person beside you and the person beside her and the person beside him and so on and on until every single one of us is accounted for. When God came to dwell in Jesus, God came to dwell in us too, and now we are the ones who are the God-bearers, the ones who bring God's love into the world. On this night we are reminded that God has blessed us and made us holy, so that we can be a blessing to the world. And so I pray that you will treasure God's love, God's blessing in your hearts and carry it with you as you go out into the world. And as God has loved and richly blessed you, may you go and be a blessing in God's beloved, broken and beautiful world. Amen