

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

Christmas Eve C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Do You Think He Will Come Tonight?

Do you think he will come tonight?

On Christmas eve long ago, after the last lights were turned out and everyone was safely tucked into bed, a little girl stole into her big brother's room, tugged at his blankets until he woke up and asked "Do you want to listen?" It happened every Christmas eve. These two little ones huddled together in the dark of the night, listened for Santa with all their might. "Do you think he will come tonight?" she asked again. "Of course he will come," her big brother said, "be quiet now and listen."

Sometimes they thought they heard sleighbells, but even when they didn't hear anything at all, they still believed something wonderful was happening. They never did stay awake all night, and still, each year they would awake to find that yes, indeed he had come. It's a beautiful image, isn't it? Children holding each other in the dark, listening for the one who is coming and knowing that even though he might elude them once again, they would still awake to the wonderful signs that he has indeed come and filled their lives with joy.¹ That big brother is a priest of more than 50 years now, and still, each Christmas eve, he listens for the one who comes to us tonight.

There is something too wonderful for words happening this night, and still, 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, trying, when we remember, to make some space for quiet so that our hearts can prepare him room. That isn't so easy to do when we're besieged with marketers marketing, sellers selling, advertisers advertising and shoppers shopping. It's not easy when we must continue to navigate a relentless pandemic that has some of us scared, some of us irritated, some of us sick, some of us dying. The "holiday season" can feel stressful and chaotic and even depressing as we try to do all the things we've decided we need to do, trying hard not to disappoint anyone or to be too disappointed ourselves.

We want so badly for it all to be perfect and beautiful because that is how Christmas is supposed to be, right? Somewhere inside ourselves we know Christmas is miraculous and mysterious and magical and somehow, we think we have to make a miracle happen. But we don't. It's already happened.

¹ Adapted from a story by the Reverend David Fly

And now, we are here. All the hard work, all the sweet intentions, all the things done and left undone are either done or undone and even the temptation to lose hope can finally fade away as we find ourselves here on this most holy night in this beautiful, gentle, holy 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 may appear, God is at work in everything and everything – absolutely everything will be redeemed.

It's hard, sometimes, to see how love wins in a world where a global pandemic rages on, where children are starving, elders are homeless, where poverty breeds hopelessness and refugees are not taken in. Mary and Joseph were refugees who were not taken in. The world today is in some ways very much like the world Jesus was born into. There are people with power and people without power. Emperor Caesar Augustus and Governor Quirinius, who show up right there at the beginning of the Christmas Eve story, had the power to rule the lives of everyone in Roman occupied territories, even someone you'd think wouldn't matter at all to them... an unwed teenaged girl about to give birth to her firstborn child in some stable in a tiny town in Palestine. But as cruel and uncaring as they were, if it hadn't been for Augustus and Quirinius, Mary and Joseph never would have gone to Bethlehem to pay taxes, and the prophecies would never have been fulfilled.

Augustus and Quirinius being part of the Christmas story is important for other reasons too. They show 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 is to come 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. When God became fully HUMAN in Jesus, God came to know our joys, our heartaches, our hopes and dreams, our suffering, and delights. The God whose name is love took all our humanity into God's own heart and is loving all of us, each and every one of us, 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. I know some learned about a judging God, a God of wrath, a God who keeps score, who punishes the bad people and rewards the good ones. But that is not the God I know, and that surely is not borne out in the world. Terrible things happen to wonderful people and people who behave horribly are often at the top of the heap. But when God came into the world in that very human baby Jesus, God came to people who were profoundly unimportant, people who pretty much had gone unnoticed.

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, probably 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 God-bearers, the ones who bring God's love into the world.

Do you think he will come tonight? Of course he will come, be quiet now and listen.

On this night we are reminded that God has blessed us and made us holy, so that we can be a blessing in the world. And so I pray that you will treasure God's love in your hearts and carry it with you out into the world. And as God has so loved and richly blessed you, may you go and be a blessing in God's beloved, broken and beautiful world. Amen