

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

Christmas Eve B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
December 24, 2023
The Rev. Karen Haig

Heaven Come To Earth

*Shepherds and wise ones will kneel and adore him,
Seraphim round him their vigil will keep;
Nations proclaim him their Lord and their Savior
But Mary will hold him, and sing him to sleep.*

*Candlelight, angel light, firelight and starglow
Shine on his cradle till breaking of dawn.
Gloria, Gloria, in excelsis Deo!
Angels are singing: the Christ child is born.¹*

What wonderous thing is happening tonight? This night that is unlike any other night, this night we have marked as sacred and holy. It's stunning, really, that after 2,000 years, we still know this night to be different from any other. We're drawn here for some reason. Perhaps it's a desire to find the true meaning of Christmas, perhaps a desire to find or feel God's presence rather than absence, a desire to question or doubt or wrestle with God until God blesses us. We are here because everything that is holy and sacred and beautiful and loving is calling out to us tonight. And something in us wants to respond.

A long time ago – thousands of years ago – a young couple traveled nearly 100 miles from a town called Nazareth to another little town in Palestine called Bethlehem. Just like everyone else in occupied Palestine, they had been ordered by the Roman government to go to the place their family had come from in order to be registered and to pay taxes. Under any other circumstances, they never would have traveled so far, the young woman being so very pregnant and the journey being so very long. They were late in arriving, having been very careful on their way, and by the time they got there all the rooms had been let and there was nowhere for them to stay. It seems an innkeeper offered them his stable where at least it would be warm. And it was in that stable on that very night, heaven and earth met when a precious baby boy was born and the world was forever changed.

But the extraordinary intimacy of heaven and earth, of human and divine, of mother and child isn't always what we experience at Christmas time. What we often experience is a whole lot of angst born of too much shopping and shoving and rushing and honking and cooking and

¹¹ Candlelight Carol, Words and Music by John Rutter

wrapping and running six ways to Sunday to get to the seemingly endless holiday events we've committed to. The "holiday season" can feel stressful and chaotic and even crazy-making as we try to do all of the things we've decided need to be done, as we try so very 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.

So now it's time to let loose of all the things we've done and left undone, to come away from the cacophony of the world, to rest in the beauty and the mystery of this holy night. Tonight, we sink into the unspeakable wonder of God come down from heaven not just to be with us, but to be one of us. Tonight we remember the unspeakable love born in a stable in Bethlehem so long ago. Tonight we remember that the God whose name is Love has come among us to show us how dearly beloved we are, the God who promises that no matter how things appear out there in the world, God is in the midst of all of it, and though God only knows how, ultimately, love will win.

It's hard, sometimes, to see how love wins in a world where whole communities are being bombed, where people are starving, where elders are homeless, where poverty breeds hopelessness, where immigrants and refugees are not taken in. Jesus was born into a world very much like that, and in very dire circumstances of his own. Emperor Augustus who reigned at the time, was utterly unconcerned about people who were poor, homeless, starving or mentally ill. He had no idea what life was like for people unlike himself and no interest in finding out. So it's interesting that the story starts with him and his executive order that sent everyone packing back to their ancestral homes. What does that have to do with a homeless – at least for this night - unwed teenaged girl giving birth to her firstborn child in a messy stable in a tiny town in Palestine?

I suppose it's the fact that from the very beginning, the ones who appear to hold all the power are not actually the ones with the power at all - or at least the power they have is not what ultimately will change the world. As it turns out, the world changed when an insignificant and unwed Palestinian teenager gave birth, in a stable, to a little baby boy. Because in that baby boy, heaven and earth, human and divine, love and more love was born. And there is simply no power greater than love.

That, my dears, is the message of Christmas. That 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 a pregnant, homeless teenager when the rest of the world was falling apart. Just as they are today, circumstances were horrific in first century Palestine. The world Jesus was born into was under Roman occupation, a world of horrendous political manipulation, rampant racism, insatiable greed, cruel power-mongering and a complete and utter lack of concern for people on the raggedy edges of society. And still, in the midst of 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. God is forever using ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

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, the God whose name is Love is being born in all the circumstances of our lives, no matter how messy they are. It's good for us to remember that God was born in a mess.

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. Sometimes people tell me they don't believe in God and when I ask them about the God they don't believe in, they tell of a God of judgment and wrath and indignation, a God who keeps score, who punishes the bad people and rewards the ones who behave. I don't blame them for not believing in that god – I don't believe in that god either. That is not the God I know. The God I know and experience came into the world as a precious, vulnerable baby boy, to people who were so unimportant as to be practically insignificant. They couldn't even get a room at the inn.

Do you see why that matters? It means that God is for everyone, everywhere and that Christmas means all of us, each and every person in the whole wide world is beloved. Everyone. No exceptions. 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 all of the messy circumstances in the world. God loves all of us, especially when we feel unlovable, because when we're feeling unlovable, that's when we need love the most.

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 settle itself gently 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 and everyone beyond these walls too. You are God's own 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 is accounted for. When God came to us in the form of that very human baby boy, we humans became divine too. Now we are the place where heaven and earth meet. Now we are the God-bearers. Now we are the ones who bring God's love into the world.

And so I pray that you will treasure God's love in your own hearts and carry it with you as you go out into the world. And as God has so loved and so richly blessed you, may you go and be a blessing in God's beloved, broken and beautiful world. Amen