

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Christmas Eve Year B
Sermon offered by The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

Our Christmas message this evening shows up in an expected place. We all have heard the story of the baby in the manger from Luke's gospel, and although there's actually very little detail about the birth of Jesus, the circumstances tell us a great deal about the intent of God in this miraculous meeting of the holy and mundane.

But in many ways, the concise statement from Paul's letter to Titus speaks to us more precisely about the deep importance of this extraordinary event. Paul tells us the Christmas message in one sentence: The grace of God appeared, and all are saved. . Luke describes the event and locates it in history, Paul tells us why it's important

Paul also tells us that Jesus' birth, the appearance of grace in human form, throws us once again into another liminal time, a threshold time, an in-between time, when we hold that grace in our hearts, and we allow it to grow into it's fullness, for Paul speaks of the arrival of grace and the waiting for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. Grace has arrived, and there's something even fuller to be anticipating.

Now for those of you who have been here for the past 4 weeks of Advent, you are probably really tired of us talking about this threshold time, and you were probably really hoping that tonight, we would finally be there, on the other side of the threshold. And we are, for tonight we do celebrate the 1st coming of Christ, the 1st revelation known to all humanity as belonging to them, and we want to hold onto this "arriving". And yet, it's only a beginning. Living in a heightened sense of awareness of the presence of the holy in our lives is our day to day work for all of us yearning for something that makes sense in our lives, something that connects us to something greater than our small worlds, something that draws from us a sense of goodness.

There is much in our lives, which dramatizes or reflects this journey from Advent (a time of darkness, of preparation, of waiting) to noticing the light

begin to flicker in our lives, to then the walk toward a fullness that we can't yet quite imagine.

Advent can be these 4 weeks before Christmas, or it can be a whole block of our lives, parts that we may describe as being in the wilderness or feeling lost or at sea adrift without an anchor. But because grace appeared in human form, there will be, at some point, suddenly a flicker of light, a recognition of something good within us we had never known or claimed before, and we get it, Christ is here. Christ has appeared. And we feel the pull to move toward that light, however difficult that may be.

I think about ordinary events, which reflect this transition, this development of consciousness of thought, this expansiveness of heart, that seems to take on a life of it's own.

It can be a continuum from when we first anticipate being pregnant, to becoming pregnant, to giving birth, and then to watch the fullness begin to grow. I so remember when I gave birth to Andrew, our oldest son, since he was born at the end of April, that mother's day was within a few weeks, and I was feeling all wonderful and proud that I could claim I was a mother that year - and yet it wasn't until the next mother's day, a year later, and a year after that, and a year after that, that I understood more fully what that really meant, the depth of joy and love which was possible through motherhood.

It could be the moment you fall in love, which leads to the commitment to be married, to actually being married, and then, as one couple at The Episcopal Home has, celebrating your 70th wedding anniversary. There's a fullness there which one could never comprehend on one's first date, or first anniversary. These are continuums of revelation of grace.

It can also happen, this moving from darkness into light, from ending into beginning, from a diminished into a whole place, in the moment when you realize your marriage is over, to the legal papers announcing it to be so, and then to the new beginning of one's life. Or it can be from a place of being consumed by grief, to a place of walking alongside grief as a companion, to then embracing a new life where grief is an old friend. Or it can be from the moment of a diagnosis of an incurable disease, to death, to new life.

These liminal times, this progression of awareness of holy in our mundane lives, this draw toward something more whole is what the story of the birth in Bethlehem is all about. Now because it's a part of God's story, we can be certain, it's not linear, but rather circular. This living in in-between times creates challenges, because we're rarely in control of the progression. Anyone who has experienced grief knows this only too well. It's not a straight line process. And it also requires an additional attentiveness, which we may not be used to giving to the ordinary events of our lives.

When we actively live in these in-between times, altered expectations come to bear. Priorities shift, have you noticed, in whatever liminal time you are living in right now? Views of ourselves can change. Relationships take on a heightened significance. Something has happened that makes this time like no other time. We are suddenly living with the knowledge that something is going to happen that will again alter our lives. This is the mind-set we are called into tonight as Christians. Tonight can be a night to look backwards to the baby in the manger, but to live forward into a new commitment to search for and live into the light of Christ. Life is no longer business as usual. We celebrate that grace has taken human form.

Now to comprehend what challenge is presented to us by this holy night, it is helpful to understand the meaning of the baby in the manger. It was not just a single, unrelated to the rest of humanity, act. Jesus being holy and human was not just important to Jesus. It's important to us. For in that improbable act of meeting heaven and earth in that moment, God made that possible for each one of us. We like Mary cradle God's love within us. There is holiness within each one of us; and that means all of our experiences, all of our places along the path of darkness toward light, diminishment into fullness, brokenness into wholeness, is implanted with a capacity for a fullness we could never imagine. Whether we see it or not, the strength of the Holy Spirit is within us. Grace took human form. Our particular human form.

So now we each need to do what Mary did, the bearer of God into the world. Mary held this knowledge of the divinity within both when she was first asked to say "yes" and when the shepherds confirmed for her that indeed the Son of David was born unto her. We, like Mary, need to ponder what this means to us?. Maybe it means nothing. Maybe we leave the service uplifted for the moment by the music, the warmth, the community, and forget all about it

tomorrow, in the midst of the packages and whatever else life is leading us toward.

Or maybe we hold onto this peace, this light, this warmth, and see it as God, and allow the flicker of light within to grow. Maybe we ponder as Mary did, what it really means. What it could really mean? What would it feel like, what would our lives be like, if we dared to let it really matter that the holy is within us?

As Mary gave birth to this vulnerable baby, born not to a great high priest, or a powerful Roman ruler, but to a lowly unmarried or hurriedly married couple, a carpenter from an unknown village and a young girl, and placed in a manger, maybe she wondered too if God's love, which she held within her and then gave birth to, would be safe and grow to maturity.

So it is with our part of God's love we hold within us. Will we choose to bear it into the world, or not? Will it be safe upon birth? Will we allow it to grow to maturity?

Tonight, before the end of our service, we will enter into a silent and holy time, when we light our candles from one another. This is our time to ponder, what has God placed within our hearts this evening? What can we imagine that God and we can do with it, to nurture it, to bring it to a fullness we could never imagine? What has been waiting to be released?

It's fairly remarkable to me that God trusted humankind to come in the form of a baby. It may have been much more convenient and more effective to get the message across, had grace appeared in human form in a family of power, where the whole world would have easily noticed and paid attention.

But God chose the gentle way, the subtle way, the way which changed the world through people's hearts; not through coercion, but through invitation. In our time of singing silent night, when we have a single light held in our hands, upon which we can focus and place our attention on the light of Christ, I urge you to listen for what God is inviting you into? There's something there. Listen for it. For tonight can be a night we commit ourselves for the first time, or recommit ourselves for the zillioneth time, to move toward the light, toward the grace within.

And then, as we leave our service, rejoicing and singing from the depths of our hearts and souls, Joy to the World, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King. May we know that is our invitation, to receive the King who is already within us, to allow this warmth within our souls to join with other souls, and allow the joy of Christ alive in us spread out into the world.