

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
First Sunday after Christmas Year C
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

Our faith journey can sometimes feel like a roller coaster ride. There can be moments of intense excitement, awe and fear as we near a mountaintop experience, before dipping down into the depths of our soul; there can be times when we can feel lulled into momentary complacency as we chug along the track in a steady rhythm; there can be times when all our attention is focused on particular spot or turn when God grabs our full focus and every single detail of the event is noticed and has an irrevocable impact on our soul; and there are times when we glance at the larger picture, take in the whole roller coaster ride as one event, a gathering together of moments from when the bar clangs shut over our laps and we begin our journey, until we raise the bar at the end and exit the ride.

Imagine your first very exciting turn on a roller coaster. You are moving along at a fairly fast clip, your hair is flying behind you, your hands clench the bar ever so tightly, your breath becomes more rapid, and you are on high alert. You notice everything – the color of the person's hair in front of you, the screams of the people nearby you, the closeness of the person's body next to you, who has slid nearer you as you enter the curve. All the details are vivid in your mind and matter.

You might imagine the story of Jesus' birth we told a few nights ago was like that first turn of the roller coaster. All the details are spelled out and paid attention to. We can all visualize the manger scene, the sheep in the fields, and the busy town of Bethlehem. It's a scene with particular details for a specific purpose. Luke wanted us to know this was an event set in a particular time in human history and sets the stage to foretell the reversal of the kingdom Jesus' birth inaugurates.

John's gospel story today of the same event, the incarnation of Jesus, the coming of God in human flesh, is told from a very different perspective. It's the long point of view that is stressed here. We're looking at the great expanse of the roller coaster ride and seeing something equally important. The comprehensive plan of God is revealed, which includes our creation and our salvation, and which is all tied up in the love of Jesus.

Luke's gospel account of Jesus' birth reveals to us the how and when and John's gospel account reveals the why – because God loves us.

John's gospel account of Jesus' coming into our world tells us that this force of love, which is God, both creates, saves and sustains us.

It's a beautiful love story, in which Jesus is the healing balm, the force of love which draws us near, and the presence of grace and hope in our lives, which

when we allow it, will shape our lives and hearts so that we can be of good spirit.

When we read and reflect upon scripture, it's essential and helpful to know what the particular words would have meant to the original hearers of the story. The word Logos, or "Word" in John's gospel can have several meanings: mind, rationality, and right order and speech.

When we take the first meaning, the mind, rationality, and right order, we can begin to understand by the prologue, that John saw the right order, for which we were purposed as human beings, is to be of good spirit, to live life well.

Now this doesn't necessarily mean to be glad all the time, but rather it connotes something so much deeper – it means to have a spirit of generosity in our heart, toward one another, at all times. This is what we were created for. This is how we are saved. This is what sustains or gives us life.

Generosity of spirit. This may sound simple, but it is not. It requires prayerful work to find a right and humble stance with one another. It requires our relationships never to be about power, control or being right, but rather, to be about being present to each other.

It requires a spiritual flexibility to listen to others who have differing opinions. Relationships are not built around coercion or persuasion of our thoughts or opinion over others. It is about listening to each other.

It requires spiritual creativity to imagine ways to build up the goodness in the community gathered. It requires our relationships and ministry to always be moving toward the light, not the darkness of doubt or harsh words.

It requires self-reflection and evaluation at the end of each day to see where the points of grace showed up and where we might have blocked the way for goodness. We must pray, reflect, and evaluate our own behavior often so we can continue to allow the love of Christ to mold us into the best of who we can be, to shape us into the image of Christ, who is our salvation.

For this to happen, we need our own lives to be in balance and be connected with God. It is true for me, and I imagine for you as well, that I can be most generous with others, when I am most connected to the God who loves, saves, and sustains me.

When we are in good relationship with God, we can allow the correcting force of Christ, which is always love, to shape us into one who is of good spirit.

For it is Christ's love alone which can wear down our harsh edges, or erode our pride or selfishness, or erase our deep wounds. Christ can invite us to be our most generous selves, and our world will turn toward goodness.

If this all seems vague and difficult to imagine in the particular, to see the details in front of you, to be attentive to what this looks like in real life, you need only to draw up from your heart the images from this past week. Never before in my life have I so experienced the grace and generosity of God through how we were church together. I praise you and thank each one of you who

- Sang your heart out with gladness and joy
- Baked loaves of bread for our guests on Christmas day
- Sat and enjoyed the company of someone you didn't know before at our Christmas dinner
- Tried something new by reading aloud in front of the congregation
- Brought beauty into our church
- Found the presence of the holy as we lit each other's candles during the Silent Night
- Danced down the aisle bringing figures to our creche
- Boxed up food for those who had hungry ones at home
- Washed that enormous pile of dishes, which didn't seem to ever stop
- Felt, as someone said to me Christmas Eve after the 10:30 service, the wall of love that greeted them upon entering our doors.

We put a concrete face on the goodness of God this week, ushering in light, offering hope, building up the family of God, through our spirit of generosity.

God's word, the logos, speaks to us each day. Our challenge is allow Christ to lift the veil for us to see and articulate the truth that is within us and each other. May we see within our relationships the presence of Christ's healing balm, our salvation, and may we be moved along on our journey toward generosity of spirit, which was in the beginning.

Amen.