

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Christmas Eve Year C

His muscles howl with pain and collapse in exhaustion, yet his mind has never been more eager and able. His feet plod along, as if made of lead, yet his spirit sprints forward. The dampness of the frigid evening settles into his bones, and yet his heart floods with warmth. Unworthiness surfaces within him, as he looks at his dark, dirty, and disheveled clothing, yet the light from within the birthing room beams welcome to his soul. His eyelids, stretched wide to see the footpath in the starlit night, now clamp shut in an unaccustomed feeling of reverence and awe.

He bends the knee of his heart, for unto him, a child is born.

His family clan heard the great news in the fields and, at break-neck speed, bolted into town to experience what has been told to them: salvation is found in the form of a baby.

He dreams of and yearns for salvation from his world that tells him he will only get poorer and his children poorer still; liberation from the voice in his head that tells him he's not good enough, deliverance from the stares of those who have more, preservation from the walls which keep him out of the place others call holy, release from being stuck without hope, and pardon from his overwhelming despair. Someone has come to save him, and gratitude spills from his heart to receive this gift from beyond. He hesitates to enter the room, yet he recognizes only too well the exhaustion Mary's slouched body portrays, and the familiar weariness of her smile beckons him forward.

And then it happens.

Mary gathers the child in the manger, cradles him sweetly, places kisses on his caressible forehead, then extends her arms and offers him the Christ child. His rough, calloused, gnarled hands caress the sweet, delicate, unblemished skin of the newborn, and his life changes forever. Love incarnate is born within his heart. No longer is there a God "out there", entering his world to fix it for him. God has come within his heart, guiding, stretching and empowering him to turn the world toward goodness.

He holds redemption in his outstretched hands, which tell the world his truth. Perhaps salvation was always there. Perhaps it is brand new to him.

There is blessing and challenge in holding redemption in our hands and cradling God within our hearts, for it reverses our perspective.

Most of our lives we are taught that the God we yearn for is "up there", found in that sphere of bliss where all is well and pure and good and holy, where all that burdens

and weighs us down is lifted. The fabrication goes on~ there is a God our heart pursues and, once found, blesses us with endless riches of joy and prosperity.

What the shepherd experienced that evening when he held the Son of God in his own calloused hands is the truth that our living God, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, dwells and reigns in the dark depths of our existence, here and now. We need to search no further; we have but to bend the knee of our heart to that presence within.

The other, “beyond us only” God who only brings us joy and prosperity can translate into our wish to readily exchange the mystery of incarnation, wherein we need to bow our head and bend our knees to God’s will, for the more accessible and simpler cultural celebration of Christmas. It can be so much easier for us to settle into the familiar rituals of Yuletide festivities for its visions of fabricated magic found in the wrappings and the decorated Christmas trees, despite knowing deep down these trimmings do not offer deep and lasting joy, that the mystery of the incarnation and following Jesus within can offer. We can want the holiday season to be a holly, jolly Christmas, rather than take God’s message to heart and allow ourselves to be scandalized like Joseph or shocked like Mary by the truth of the baby our shepherd held on that holy night. We may not want to feel, as the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, “the shiver of fear that God’s coming should arouse in us” at even at the prospect of God coming within us, for we may share Joseph’s sense of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task ahead.

For we who truly yearn for the mystery of incarnation, born this evening within us, must be ready for the hard work of Christian living.

We must be liberated from a notion of a God who wanders far from us, when our life takes a downward turn, for we now know God, with us, not instead of us, must change our lives. We must be set free from the belief that we can pursue and find God through our good works alone, for we now know that our hearts must also turn toward compassion and love in all our relationships. We must be delivered from the assumption that when bad things happen, it’s God’s fault, for we now know that God doesn’t cause bad things, but rather is within us, strengthening us to faithfully move through the darkness into the light. We must be pardoned of our sins of complacency of believing that who we are right now is enough, for we now know that we are continually being called to grow in the likeness of the Christ within. We must be saved from being only grateful receivers of something beyond us to also being attentive responders to the love within. These are the challenges set before us in the moment Mary extended her arms and offered the Christ child to our shepherd.

Why would we ever want to do this, exchange the lightheartedness of the Christmas season, for the formidable act of bending the knee of our heart to the God we cradle within?

Because when we do, blessings abound. When we meet Jesus and know he is within us and will never leave us, we know our life is continually beginning anew. Possibilities explode of who we can become, what we can offer to the world, and what the God within us and for us can do with our lives.

Our shepherd thought his arriving at the stable to find the baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger would be the end of the journey, only to find out it was a beginning. He runs back into the fields, down into the villages, proclaiming a fire burning within him, forever igniting a heart turned toward justice, a soul alighted with passion for goodness, and a love which consumes all despair.

All of that is ours too, for this evening, this holy night, we hold redemption in our outstretched hands in the form of the body of Christ, and we bend the knee of our heart to welcome the Christ child within.
Amen.