

**Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation
... the One who brought us into being
The God alive in each of us
... as God was alive in Jesus
And the power of God known in the Spirit
... the Spirit who blessed Mary with God's Son.
Amen.**

What a glorious Christmas Eve! Music that fills the soul with delight ... this church decorated beautifully with greens ... and an evening filled with spirit. There is even a chill in the air just to remind us what it was like when we lived up north.

Two thousand years ago the evening was filled with spirit ... the origin of the spirit we have this evening. Yes, two thousand years ago the evening was filled with spirit, but that was about all. The world into which Jesus was born was filled with darkness ... a literal darkness that the shepherds tending their flocks in the fields knew well. But also a darkness of political and military oppression, economic hardship, and even a darkness in the Temple ... supposedly the abode of God.

The Gospel of Luke begins by setting the stage for Jesus birth, telling of a world that is waiting upon God's anointed one to arrive. In the first chapter of Luke, Zechariah speaks of what the coming Messiah will mean:

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78-79).

Instead of hearing those words as a prophesy of an event two thousand years ago, we need to hear them speaking to us now ... tonight. God's incarnated presence in this hurting world brings us to the dawn of a new day ... a new day when darkness will be interrupted by light ... and death will be interrupted by life. The light and life that is Jesus brings us to a new way of being and seeing ... to this way of peace that Zechariah prophesies. And, that light and life is also available to us ... tonight. The God that was alive in Jesus can also be alive in each one of us. This is our participation in the mystery of incarnation. This is a path of possibility.

Just imagine the chaos in Bethlehem during a census. All who traced their heritage to the city of David returned to be counted, and this event must have been overwhelming to residents and visitors alike. Envision, if you will, how this might have been for Mary and Joseph ... migrant parents ... internalizing, as all parents do, the vulnerability of their newborn child. They were

there to be counted so they could be taxed by the Roman government. Yet I imagine that in everyone else's eyes they didn't count for much ... giving birth in stable because there was no room for the marginalized in the inn.

In the midst of this story we hear about some shepherds taking care of their flock of sheep. The shepherds visited by angels, and the encounter speaks of possibility being found in the unexpected. Can you imagine being a shepherd startled from the half-sleep of the night watch and hearing what this first heavenly messenger had to say? The savior ... the Messiah ... the anointed ... expected one. He is finally here, and in the form of a baby, to be found in a feed trough of a cattle stall no less.

Now, being a shepherd was a job, but it was at the very bottom of the ladder. Can you see these fellows ... probably young ... turning to one another as soon as the glimmer from the last angel has left the night sky? I imagine them being very confused. They had heard of the possibility of a "Savior ... a Messiah" who would change things, but could this really be true? In the dark they try to determine the others' doubt. "Maybe," one of them says. "Maybe what those angels said is true." Some of his compatriots still doubted. There was silence ... except for snickers. "No, he's right," says another, "maybe the time has actually come when things will change. Maybe the day we have been waiting for is actually here. Maybe ..."

So the shepherds wandered to a barn outside of the small town of Bethlehem. After some searching they found two strangers and a baby in the cattle stall of a small barn. At least that part of what the angel said was true ... so maybe the rest was also true. They knew that the possibility of all they had been hoping for, dreaming for, just might be lying there, a baby in a feeding trough, asleep.

When the shepherds left, they could not contain themselves. Luke says they told everyone in sight, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard. These simple working men ... most likely young men ... were caught up in the possibility of newness, liberation, and peace that was all bound up in this child and they had to tell everybody:

Maybe he will grow up and do this. Maybe things will change in this desperate situation. Maybe our people will no longer be under the oppression of the Caesar. Maybe these lawmakers of the temple will finally have someone challenge them. Maybe he will spend his life with people like us ... poor ... uneducated ... marginalized ... the sinners and the outcasts. Maybe people will be healed. Maybe the hungry will be fed. Maybe ... just maybe ... God has entered into this world in the form of a powerless infant. Maybe ... Maybe ... Maybe ...

We all know the stories of what this child did and said when he grew up. Those "maybe's" became "truly, truly, I say unto you" as he taught the crowds and challenged the religious leaders. Possibility became reality as he healed the sick, calm storms, helped the blind to see, and fed the multitudes with simple loaves and fish.

Two thousand years later, we are still people who claim this infant Jesus as the beginning of our story. We call ourselves by his name, Christians ... little anointed ones ... children of the promise, if you will. By claiming this birth story, we name ourselves as the people of possibility.

When we don't want to watch the morning news. When confronted with yet another death toll. When faced with another political stalemate that feels more like a game than governing. When angry with the people around us ... our neighbor ... our siblings, or parents, or children ... our even our wife, or husband, or partner ... it is in that darkness that we claim that there still exists a possibility for understanding, a possibility for peace and reconciliation, a possibility that today, or maybe tomorrow, good news will triumph that change will happen.

When we see some of this darkness, violence, and apathy inside of ourselves and do battle with our responsibilities in this world, we claim that a possibility still exists for renewal in our own life ... for light to enter into our hearts and souls. We can claim that there is a possibility that we can show love to others. There exists a possibility all around us and within each of us for incarnation to occur. The mystery and the glory of incarnation ... of God coming alive in us as God can alive in Jesus ... as proclaimed by Zechariah and the shepherds ... that mystery and glory is that we will always confront it in the region of the unexpected.

In the story of Jesus' birth, as well as his life, death, and resurrection, we see that maybe things will be radically different than we have experienced thus far. We encounter the unexpected ... we encounter "maybe" ... we encounter possibility.

Maybe people will be healed. Maybe the poor will be fed. Maybe all will be treated and loved as equals. Maybe peace will reign and wars will cease. This is the language of possibility.

Maybe Word will become flesh. Maybe God will become human, just like us. This is the language of incarnation.

Maybe God will be revealed in the homeless man ... or the woman selling her body to stay alive ... or the neighbor down the street. Maybe God will be found in the former friend you wrote off years ago. This is the language of the unexpected. This is the language of optimistic possibility ... and faith in the God who brought us into being and came alive in Jesus.

In the midst of everything happening in this world, Christians still claim possibility; we still claim incarnation, resurrection, and the unexpected. Even now, this year at St. Cyprian's ... in St. Augustine, Florida ... in the United States of America ... we still claim this incarnation of the divine spirit of God that we celebrate tonight in the birth of Jesus. Because of this, we proclaim possibility ... we speak the language of maybe ... we try to live faithfully in the realm of what can be.

Into the chaos and uncertainty of our own day does God come, again and again, incarnating in the most vulnerable of lives and contexts the unconditional love of God in Jesus, showing ...

through acts of mercy, grace, compassion, kindness, and justice ... that in the divine economy, everyone counts ... there are no exceptions.

We live today and we look toward tomorrow with our eyes open. We join with Zechariah and the nameless shepherds in being hopeful for what is coming. We trust in the power of God and the desire of God for change in this world, and we confess Jesus to be at the center of that change and at the center of who we are. Let us boldly speak the language of maybe ... the maybe that awaits and expects incarnation to be more than a date on our calendar.

It is by our hands that the hungry are fed, by our sharing that the naked are clothed, by our words that the grieving are comforted, by our prayers that the disheartened find encouragement, and by our arms that the lonely come to know the embrace of the One who loves them without condition. Know that you are held in that same holy embrace as we gather by the stable of new birth in adoration and thanksgiving.

*May the humility of the shepherds,
the perseverance of the wise men,
the joy of the angels,
and the peace of the Christ-child
be God's gift to you this Christmas and always.*

Amen.