

**Christmas Eve,  
December 24, 2013**

**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.**

The Feast of the Incarnation. The Nativity of Our Lord. The birth of Jesus ... the Christ child. Christmas. It is the gift of God's Son to the world, the divine presence of God coming alive in human form. It is God's blessing upon us so that we, too, might be a blessing in return to God's world. What a glorious night, made all the more glorious in this beautiful little church.

Not too long ago I passed a church with a portable sign out on the street, the kind to which you can affix plastic letters that spell out the message of your choice. This sign proclaimed simply: Another Chance – 9 A.M. Sunday. It may have been the clever simplicity of the message that caught my eye and made me wonder whether "Another Chance" was the name of a particular church program or worship service, or whether the sign just meant that if you missed church last Sunday morning at 9, you could catch it this Sunday morning at 9. But what most captured my imagination was the stark reminder that this is what we have spent Advent preparing for ... another chance.

The Incarnation of God in Christ Jesus is both the assurance and realization of another chance, 2,000 years ago and every moment since. Without fanfare, in fact virtually without notice, the God who created the universe gave us another chance to get it right, by being born as one of us, a divine and yet perfectly common baby, no different from any of us save for the capacity to love without condition. At Christmas we remember the gift of another chance in the human birth of divine love, because remembering gives us hope. It gives us hope that love can live in this broken world, and as outrageous as it may seem, hope that love can live through the human frailty of our own lives.

We just heard the story of the birth of Jesus from Luke's gospel. It is the stuff of Christmas pageants, and in my almost 40 years of ordained ministry I have seen my share of Christmas pageants. Many of them were rather elaborate affairs with set designers, wardrobe coordinators, sound and lighting staff and over-worked directors concerned that the flu might decimate the cast. But one of the most memorable Christmas pageant for me was at a former parish in Toledo, Ohio in the early 1990's. There were very few children in the congregation then so there was only a narrator, a young boy playing Joseph, and a middle-school girl in the role of Mary. All the other characters for the Christmas pageant were recruited as they entered the sanctuary. Some people were handed sheep cut-outs on a stick with balls of cotton pasted

on cardboard. Others were given long staffs and crooks ... like these ... and immediately became shepherds. The angels had glowing stars on long poles.

As Joseph and Mary entered and walk down the main aisle of the church they stopped at each pew and asked each person if they had any room in their inn. They all replied, "No, I have no room in my inn." Mary and Joseph looked dejected as they move toward the altar. By the time Joseph and Mary got to the front of the church you could hear sniffles throughout the congregation. After climbing a couple of steps into the chancel Mary turned away from the people, pulled out the pillow showing that she was "with child," and held up a naked baby doll. The angels cried out "Halleluiah" and the shepherds stomped their staffs. And as the congregation sang "We Three Kings" two of the oldest men in the congregation, and the matriarch of the parish came strolling down the aisle in bathrobes and Burger King Crowns.

Christmas pageants, whether elaborate or simple, are in sharp contrast to that very first Christmas we just heard about in Luke's gospel. We smile at the cozy nativity scene, but have you ever spent the night in a barn, much less given birth in one? The reality of that nativity event must have been very different.

The clear fact is that Jesus didn't enter a world of sparkly Christmas trees and Hallmark singing greeting cards. Jesus entered a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness, and poverty, and political oppression. Jesus was born an outcast, a homeless person, a refugee, and finally he became a victim of the powers of that world. In spite of these humble beginnings, Jesus becomes the perfect savior for the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the exiled, and the nobodies. That is how our spiritual ancestors have been described in scripture time and time again ... not as the best and the brightest ... but those who in their weakness become a sign for the world of the wisdom and power of God.

It is into this world that Jesus ... the misfit and outcast ... was born, and he is born over and over again in every generation to those who know that Christmas is about God and the divine presence coming alive in human form. The gospel that acknowledges brokenness, pain, and the tragedy of life is good news to us all. There is actually hope for all who find this season tinged with despair or pain. It is in that dank, smelly, barn of our souls that Jesus can most often find a welcome ... the divine presence of God coming alive in us.

Tonight we sing Christmas carols and we rejoice in the Nativity of Our Lord. Perhaps the greatest of all Christmas songs is that of Mary's, found in the second chapter of Luke which we sang this evening ... as we have all through Advent ... as our opening Hymn of Praise:

*He has shown the strength of his arm;  
He has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has brought down the mighty from their thrones,  
And has lifted up the lowly;  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
And the rich he has sent away empty.*

Mary's "Magnificat" tells us that this new king is likely to turn the world upside-down. Mary's declaration about the high and mighty being brought low and the lowly exalted is at the heart of the Christmas story. The Son of God is born in an animal stall. Mary herself is a poor young woman, part of an oppressed people, and living in an occupied country. Her prayer is the hope of the downtrodden everywhere, a prophecy that those who rule by wealth and domination, rather than serving the common good, will be overturned because of what has just happened in the little town of Bethlehem. Her proclamation can be appropriately applied to any rulers of regimes that prevail through sheer power, instead of doing justice.

One of the strongest contrasts in this story is between the humble settings of the manger and barn, palatial home of the unseen, but ever-present, Caesar Augustus who ordered the census so he could collect taxes. The institution ... Caesar Augustus's Roman Empire ... had its needs, and it met them through military might and intimidation. Interestingly, in our own time a Roman institution has been turned upside down by the humility of one man ... Pope Francis. Instead of living in a palace he lives in what is essentially a rooming house. Instead of being transported in a chariot he travels in a used car. Instead of going to the opera he visits the poor in the streets. Instead of greeting dignitaries in private audiences he kisses the crippled in public. Pope Francis has been lauded by many ... including Time Magazine ... for the transformation he seems to be bringing to institution of the Catholic Church. I personally believe that he offers hope for those who Mary called the "lowly" ... and I also imagine that he poses a threat to those who are "mighty" on their "thrones" in the institution.

Remember, the story of the birth of Jesus just about what happened 2,000 years ago ... it is also about our world today. Pope Francis offers a hope to many ... something was born anew when he was elected. But what gets turned upside down in our outer world can also be true for our inner world. If the divine is born in us it will turn our world ... our inner and outer world ... upside down. We don't like to go to those places within us that are like a smelly barn. We would rather stay in the inn. But sometimes life rejects us, and pushes us out the back door into the darkness of pain and grief and sorrow. Life is like that. It is not all joy and peace and serenity. But there is always ... always ... the divine hope. That is what this story is telling us. Christ will be born. And Christ will be born in the humble setting of our darkest and most abhorrent places within us.

This story that begins in a smelly barn finally ends on a cross. By human standards it is a failure ... a message of weakness. Christmas reminds us that our God has come into our broken world ... and into our broken selves ... and that human judgments are not the last judgment, human justice not the last justice.

Christmas: The Nativity of Our Lord, The Feast of the Incarnation, the celebration of the birth of Jesus. We are often filled with tears of joy at the sounds of the music and the scene of Jesus lying in a manger. But I imagine that some of those tears are also tears of sorrow recognizing the broken parts of ourselves longing for healing and yearning for wholeness. If we listen to the story carefully we can hear our own plight in the words of the gospel, and see in our minds eye the hope that God is bringing us as the divine presence of God comes alive in this world. It is

God's blessing upon us so that we, too, might be a blessing in return to God's world. We marvel at the story, especially when we understand that it is happening in ourselves, just as it did 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem.

This Christmas, once more we gather at the manger-side to welcome the infant Christ anew into our hearts and to receive again another chance. May that chance be for each of us a new opportunity to offer the same to the world: another chance for peace, another chance for mercy, another chance for reconciliation, another chance for justice, another chance to bring heaven to earth, as on one still night in Bethlehem, so many years ago, it was.

So, on this Eve of Christmas ... on the Eve of the Feast of the Nativity ... on the Eve of the Feast of the Incarnation:

**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.**