

The Warp and Weft of Christmas
Christmas Eve 2020
A Sermon Offered by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
St. Columba's Episcopal Church

Merry Christmas! I am so glad to be with you to celebrate! I have never felt more grateful than I do right now to join you in this festive feast of the nativity. As the angel announced to the shepherds long ago and our Gospel readers just poured out for us, "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you – to *you*, to *us* – is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

I feel such joy because this is the news our souls long to hear. It's been a hard year. As if our personal and collective shadows have been laid bare; the underbelly exposed for months on end. The long festering divisions of race, caste and economic access – and our participation and perpetuation therein – make plain our smallness. Shot through with a fearsome global disease. And our personal, particular hardships.

From whence is our help to come? cried the Psalmist. Well, our help comes from God, from love, God's love. Christmas during a pandemic.

Dr. Teresa Thayer Snider, a New York State public school superintendent, recently posted a letter, "I am writing today about the children of this pandemic." She notes with alarm those educators who think their students will need to catch up after a lost year. "What on earth are we trying to catch them up on?" she asks.

"When the children return to school, they will have returned with a new history that we will need to help them identify and make sense of. When the children return to school, we will need to listen to them. They have endured a year that has no parallel in modern times.

"Their brains may not have been focused on traditional school material, but they did not stop either. Their brains may have been focused on where their next meal is coming from, or how to care for a younger sibling, or how to deal with missing grandma, or how it feels to have to surrender a beloved pet, [to be cut off from friends, to watch plans vanish,] or how to deal with death. Our job is to help them write that history.

"Resist those who are in a hurry to "fix" kids and make up for the "lost" time. The time was not lost, it was invested in surviving. The children do not need to be fixed. They are not broken. They need to be heard. They need to be given as many tools as we can provide to nurture resilience and help them [make sense of] a post pandemic world.

"Greet them with art supplies and writing materials, and music and dance and so many other avenues to help them express what has happened to them in their lives during this horrific year. Greet them with stories and books that will help them make sense of an upside-down world." (End quote.)

This time was not lost, but our lives were not lived as we'd anticipated. So greet them with stories. The children are not only the ones who would do well to engage such exploration and integration. We each, we all, have some deep heart-work, soul-work to do.

Long ago before we had diagnoses for our various neuroses, people nonetheless recognized when they were out of sorts with their soul. Something deep inside was amiss; a sense of alienation from one's mythic roots. When this happened the shaman would frequently

chant the creation stories and the foundation myths of the tribe so as to reconnect the lost soul to its roots, its archetypal rhythms. (Hollis)

This is why I am so glad to celebrate Christmas with you: In like fashion, we gather each year to chant the story of how God's love was born, made flesh, and dwelt – and still dwells – among us. We may come to terms with our smallness, helplessness, and broken parts, if through it we are able to connect our little stories to great love. For the time being, we need not solve the riddles, or get everything sorted out. Our task at the moment is to dwell in the story, listen to its song, delight in its colors, and fill in some more; invite the Spirit to weave the threads of our lives into the warp and weft of God's salvation.

I daresay a very few of us is able to follow our own familiar Christmas traditions this year. So celebrate in a new way, just this once (wink). Read aloud the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel; read the first chapter of John's Gospel. Hear the good news that God is incarnate and dwells among us... let this story take up residence in the imagination of our hearts.

Christmas begins the story of how Jesus came to live among us as God's love. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot even comprehend it. God in seven pounds of human flesh, awaiting our embrace, emanating love.

As Jesus is God's love incarnate, our life is to love. We are alive to love. Each morning, when we wake, we can set an intention: to love. Each evening, we can reflect on ways we were open to receive love and to love others. Yes, I am with you always, even to the end of the ages.

In Luke's telling of the story – with a decree from Emperor Augustus while Quirinius was governor – is not historically accurate. But that's not important; the point is that God's love is incarnate in specific times among particular people: through a young maiden, in Bethlehem, with shepherds. The point is not that God's love is some big ethereal truth – although surely it is that too; the point is God's love is manifest in the particulars; through God's beloved – which is me and you.

If you read through the Gospels, you'll find that a lot of what Jesus revealed to us came through mundane, basic flesh-and-blood interactions. In the way he was heading somewhere and stopped what he was doing to notice a beggar and listen to him. In the way he reached out and touched people who were dirty – literally, with open sores; people others feared and shunned. He used mud and spit to give sight to a blind man. In a moment of foolish conviction, put his own body between the angry crowds throwing stones and a woman who was no more sinful than any of the rest of us. Naturally, he wept when his friend died.

It wasn't always pretty. Jesus got really angry with those who perpetuated injustice. He got close to the ickiest people and crossed social taboos. He gave people choices – to be themselves, to walk away. He was never coercive; irresistible, maybe. He asked for nothing less than everything, complete sacrifice – to love with all our heart, soul, and strength.

Jesus prayed to God for wisdom and strength; he didn't always know what to do, or feel full of courage. Even so, he always followed the prompting of love coursing through his body and soul. So he ate supper with the tax collector who repented and gave away his wealth. He washed the feet of his friends. And forgave them when they betrayed him. He loved the Roman centurion.

In the flesh, each day, Jesus was God's love. So that, in the flesh, each day, we might live God's love.

Some days, we fall short and bungle it. It's okay: because every time we fall short is a perfect occasion to reaffirm our intention. This is pure gift. The time is not lost and we are not broken. Chant the story once again. Avail yourself of the ways God is telling you of God's love and your place in the world. Listen to the birds, see the changing light in the night sky. Forgive someone. Hug someone. Start afresh. I am alive to love.

How does our story become God's story, and God's story become our own? Just like this. For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

This is the peace that surpasses understanding. Merry Christmas!