

Christmas Eve

Dec. 24, 2016

St. James, Wheat Ridge

Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

By Becky Jones

The story we heard tonight is such a familiar story.
I bet everyone here could have told it, maybe almost word for word.
We know that story so well.
We know how a young virgin named Mary
conceived a child by the Holy Spirit...
We know how Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem,
but found no room at the inn,
so Jesus was born in a stable, among animals, and laid to rest in a manger...

We know how angels came and announced the good news
to shepherds abiding in their fields...
We know how the shepherds,
after witnessing the most incredible concert in human history,
left their flocks and went to see the Baby Jesus...

All these stories are such a part of our heritage as Christians.
We hear this story told, year after year.
Has there ever been a story re-enacted more often?
How many people here, at some point in your life,
have played the part of a shepherd or an angel or even a sheep
in a Christmas pageant?
The story we heard told here tonight is part of our DNA.

The thing is, that's only part of the story.
There's another part of the story
that we don't often hear or tell.
It's that part of the story
where the angels stop singing and go back to heaven.
It's that part of the story
where the shepherds bid Mary and Joseph and the baby goodbye,
and return to their sheep.

At some point, Jesus and Mary pack up their things and leave Bethlehem, and after spending some time as refugees in Egypt, they finally make it back to Nazareth, back to where they started, to the place where Jesus grows up.

It's that part of the story
where everything starts to look
pretty much like it did before the birth.
When the night sky is silent once more,
and the manger once again holds nothing but hay.
It's THAT part of the story.

But that part of the story doesn't signal the end of Christmas.
Rather, it's really the beginning.
Christmas *really* begins when we stop talking about
shepherds and angels and mangers,
and instead allow our lives to become the story.
Our everyday lives
into which Jesus comes again and again and again.

In a few days from now,
family and friends who are visiting will return home.
The last of the Christmas turkey will be simmering in a soup pot.
Unless we abide by the Denver-specific tradition
of leaving our decorations up through Stock Show,
we'll start taking down the tree,
storing away the ornaments,
packing away the crèche.
The bills will start to arrive,
and like the shepherds, we'll return to the routine of our daily lives.
And everything will look like it did before Christmas.

But looks can be deceiving.
Because it *won't* be the same.
Because something miraculous will have happened.
It's the miracle that happens
every time something human
touches something divine.

Science has a name for this phenomenon.
It's called the "quantum leap,"
and it describes what happens
when an atom or one electron
suddenly moves from one energy level to another,
without passing through any of the levels in between.
It's a sudden and inexplicable transformation
that OUGHT to be impossible.
Yet it happens. And we can't explain it.
We just don't SEE it happen.

And what's true at the microscopic level is also true at the human level.
When humanity comes in contact with the divine,
transformation inexplicably happens.
Quantum leaps occur.
Miracles abound.
But because we don't always SEE it happen,
we can sometimes mistake a miracle
for everyday life.
And who wants to hear a story about that?

Much as we love that first part of the Christmas story,
we need to love and trust that other part of the story too.
The part that doesn't get told.
Because the miracle of Christmas
doesn't stop with a virgin birth and angels singing.
The miracle of Christmas continues
in the most ordinary places and circumstances.

Look at your life, and what do you see?
Name the reality, whatever it might be.
That's a place where Jesus is being born,
a place where God's divinity meets your humanity,
and that can leave to quantum transformation.

He is born in the joy and celebrations of your life.
He is born in the sorrow and grief of your life.
He is born in times of hope and in times of fear.
He is born in your successes and in your failures.

The grace of God's saving presence
fills every aspect of our lives,
and brings with it transformation love and healing.

So let the angels depart and the shepherds return to the fields.
Let the sky go dark and silent.
Let the Holy Family go home.
The manger of his birth is no longer in Bethlehem.
The manger of Jesus' birth is now your life.
It is your life that cradles a king.

This Christmas Eve, I'd like to encourage everyone
to come to the altar rail and receive communion in a little while.
When you kneel at the rail,
and hold out your hands
imagine that your cupped hands are a manger.
They are the cradle into which Jesus will be placed.

And once again, that which is divine will touch that which is human,
and the quantum leap takes place.
A light once again shines on people who live in darkness.
The grace of God appears,
and the miracle happens once again.

And the angels once again deliver "good news of great joy."
Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad.
Let the sea thunder and let the field be joyful.
Let all the trees shout for joy.
Because he has come.
Again.

Amen.