

Christmas Morning – Dec 25 2023

Merry Christmas!

This quiet service feels just about right for Christmas morning – a time to settle into the momentous thing that God has done.

Don't get me wrong. The lights, the carols, the pageantry are great. Last night's pageant in fact was a raucous affair – it was called *While Shepherds Washed their Sheep by Night* – a retelling by our parish children. Their own spin made the story sparkle last night.

But it's in the quiet aftermath of Christmas morning that we can begin to understand what it means to live into the story of God's incarnation among us.

I've been thinking a lot this weekend about how fragile, how vulnerable was this thing God did – joining our humanity as a baby, entering the human story at such a precarious time. Last night, as I preached on the familiar Christmas story from Luke, I considered what a risk God took in falling into humanity's arms as a human child -- how much trust God put in the faithful people who birthed, and protected and parented Jesus to manhood!

What could be more fragile, more vulnerable than a child?

Well I can think of one thing, and that is a Word. Especially these days. A word is a very vulnerable thing – it can be misheard, misunderstood, misused. It can be twisted and suppressed and misquoted. A word can be misremembered or forgotten altogether.

God came to us as Word, the gospel of John reminds us on Christmas morning. God came as Word made flesh. What a dangerous move, given what we do to words.

And yet, I'm also reminded of the tenacity, the resilience of Word, especially that which is spoken with integrity, with intention, with love, especially that which is spoken by God.

Words make worlds. And in ancient thinking, the power of Word to shape and form was a real thing. So, God speaks and creation leaps forward under the command: Let there be....

And Isaiah reminds us that God's words go forth from the divine mouth and do not return to God empty but accomplishes all that God has purposed and prospers in what they are sent to do.

God's Word is not as fragile as a human word. God's Word gets things done.

And so, it is with Jesus -- the Word of God, who did not return to the Father until he had accomplished all that God had purposed, and who prospered in all he was sent to do. On Christmas morning that might be getting ahead of the story. But we know that the Word will not stay a baby long-- in a few weeks Jesus will be grown man baptizing people in the Jordan River.

And the Word became flesh and had its own challenges to be sure, John reminds us. “The world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”

Well actually many of his own people did – those faithful souls like Mary and Joseph and the Shepherds, and the apostles he called, and the disciples whom he sent out, and the many who sought his healing and understood his stories. But not all. And that is the case today.

The word can be heard and believed, or the word can be missed or doubted.

And so as powerful as God’s Word is to make worlds, God still took a risk with us as bearers of the Word.

I’m feeling that risk, that precarity this year especially as I consider the war that is raging in the Holy Land. I can’t sing Oh Little Town of Bethlehem without thinking about the violence that is occurring there now in the West Bank and all through the Holy in this unholy war. I can’t help but think of the millions caught in the cross fire, of the more than 20,000 dead, how a quarter of the population of Palestine starving. I can’t help thinking about hostages and families that do not know their fate. I can’t help thinking of the refusal to honor the world’s call for ceasefire.

At the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, in Bethlehem, the Christmas Crèche features Baby Jesus in the rubble. He’s wrapped in a Kafia, the headdress of Palestinians. There are camels in the dust. Broken concrete is all around him. Mary and Joseph and the wise men are working frantically to dig him out. It is jarring and unsettling, and so true to the human experience there that it’s frightening.

The Palestinian Christians of Bethlehem have canceled all their Christmas festivities this year, holding only somber midnight services on this weekend of Christ’s birth. The churches there are not only places of worship but of sanctuary, offering a measure of safety, though that is not guaranteed.

Sami Awad, Palestinian Peace Activist and Founder of Holy Land Trust wrote in a post on Facebook that Christmas in Bethlehem this year “gives us the real opportunity to remember what it was like to live in this land under a brutal occupation 2000 years ago (and today), and the reason why the prince of Peace was actually born, not to be celebrated but to be followed.

Until this year, the Christmas stories often left me feeling a little like a spectator looking in at something going on quite outside of me – as though the figures in the manger scene were coming to life as I look on. But this year the images on the news of veiled mothers fleeing with swaddled children have changed the way I look at the story and the creche.

Peace is perhaps the most fragile and vulnerable Word of all. And it might require as much faith as our belief in the Word made flesh.

This morning we have no pageant. No stories from the Gospel of Luke. What is born to us this morning is a Word. To enter the story on Christmas morning is to take our places as receivers, bearers, doers of

the Word. We are asked not only to hold this Word in us like a light of hope in dark times. We are asked to proclaim it, so that it gets into the hearts of others.

In our mouths, Word becomes Story becomes lived example. Word becomes bread becomes shared meal. Word becomes flesh, and it's our flesh that it dwells within 2000 years after the human flesh of Jesus died, rose and ascended. Word remains. And its power remains to birth children of God and agents of peace. Perhaps that makes us midwives of the Word made flesh, midwives of peace in our world.

Isaiah reminds us of the power of that Good Word in the world today – the same power it had thousands of years ago for his own people:

*How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,*

*who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."*

...

*Break forth together into singing,  
you ruins of Jerusalem;*

*for the Lord has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.*

On this Christmas morning, may we be we be receivers of the Word, flesh for the Word to speak out of, voices for the Word to be proclaimed – that God continues to do something wonderful and new, that God's Word is one that destroys violence and makes peace. And that is good news this day and always.

Merry Christmas!