

Christmas Eve Sermon 2023

Catch me!

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Have you ever done that stunt where you shout Catch Me! and you throw your hands wide and fling yourself backwards into the arms of the people right behind you?

At a retreat or a team building function that's often called a "Trust Fall." But when you are 4 years old, that's just called "keeping your parents on their toes." Catch me! And God forbid you miss.

When I consider what God did when God entered humanity as Jesus on Christmas, I think it's like that Trust Fall. Catch me, God cried, and threw the divine hands wide and flung Godself back into the waiting hearts of humanity.

And stayed with us there. Immanuel.

There isn't a greater story of vulnerability, trust and I daresay recklessness, as the one about God joining humanity as Jesus. God didn't exactly choose a safe and secure birth in a time of prenatal care and First Alert centers. No, God chose first century Palestine where the divine self would live among an oppressed people, would take on refugee status, would grow up to be an itinerant teacher and healer, relying on others for meals and a place to stay.

Now remember God had been part of the life of Israel every step of the way up to this point. But that first Noel, that was the first time that God had been catchable, holdable, feedable and incredibly fragile. It was the first time you could smell God's head. The first time that God had a human life that could end at any moment.

Catch me, God cried, and threw the divine arms wide and flung Godself back into the waiting hearts of humanity.

And it wasn't as if everybody came running to catch God. But enough did. And it happened so quietly, so typically for the time – a pregnant couple, whose labor starts while traveling and who make it to a stable just in time for the baby to arrive. Not unusual in those days.

In fact there were two kinds of people who got the message that God had entered creation in a whole, new amazing way: The people who looked for it, and the people who longed for it.

Read on in the Gospels and you'll meet the people who looked for it: People like those three foreign astrologers who searched the skies for signs of a new king; or Anna and Simeon, two faithful elders who would not die until they held the Messiah in their arms.

And even today, we know people like this. Those so good at looking for the presence of God that they see signs of the divine everywhere – those candle lighters, prayers and praisers. You know who I mean?

And then there are the ones who long. Isaiah in today's first reading called them the People who walked in darkness. Cue the shepherds tending their flocks by night. They stand in for all the little ones and lowly ones of Israel, who longed for release– from poverty, or war, or dislocation. They longed for a God who would deliver them. And they knew a great light when they saw it.

And even today, we know people like this. Aren't we all like this a little bit – people who have walked in darkness of one kind or another at one time or another? People who know what it means to long for joy to return, or healing to happen, or forgiveness to be possible? And we're drawn to light and song and the warm community of folks who also long.

Mary was both of these at the same time: one who looked and one who longed. A clear-sighted girl, who was more impressed by what angels said than by the entrances they made. A straight-talking girl, who knew how much her people needed a savior to cast the mighty from their thrones and send the full empty away. When God cried out "catch me", she took the full impact of that trust fall, and she held him and she birthed him and she carried him and she followed him all the way to the cross and beyond.

So the ones who look and the ones who long tend to be the ones who recognize love when it cries out "catch me" and throws its arms wide. But there's a catch. There's always a catch with God. Once we allow Jesus to land firmly in our lives, how long will we be willing to hold him, listen to him, bring him to the waiting world? Jesus won't stay a baby. In just a few Sundays, he'll be a grown man seeking baptism at the Jordan. And he'll start making demands.

In some ways this Christmas I feel that the demands on my faith and what it asks of me are very great, especially as I consider the violence that is occurring in the Holy Land right now, and the animosity that marks our own civil discourse here in the U.S. 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 trying to dig him out. It is jarring and unsettling, and so true to the human experience there that it's frightening.

Catch me if you can, God says, and lands in a war zone, amidst diaspora, a member of a community that is chased out of its home and sent out into the world. Catch me if you can says God the refugee, God the dispossessed, God the imprisoned peace activist, God the hostage.

Those who look for God will see the Divine child in all these places. Those who long for God will be looking out of those places. And we, largely on the sidelines, will need to find a voice to speak a word of hope to people stumbling around in darkness, even as we stumble about ourselves. And that hope has only one name – peace. There is really only one reversal to the violence, to the hatred that cries out to us to take sides and send arms. And that is peace. The peace of Christmas – indeed the peace of Christ – wants from us an ongoing commitment to foster nonviolence as an act of faith – in our own lives and in the lives we touch as individuals and as church. We do not get a pass the rest of the week, or the rest of the year.

Catch me if you can, cries the Prince of Peace. Once he's in our arms, can we do what peace demands of us?

A great light has the mixed blessing of making everything visible that comes near. Including us, and all we'd like to hide in our darkness – our failings, our prejudices, our need to be in control, our addiction to violence and revenge. But our gathering here – the vulnerable act of celebrating Christmas each year – is an invitation to acknowledge in ourselves what God sees in us all the time, and still cries out to us "Catch Me!"

Catch me as I have caught you.

Stay with me as I have stayed with you.

Love me as I have loved you.

From crèche to cross and home again.

Amen. Merry Christmas.