

Morning Meditation – December 14

⁷And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:7 (KJV)

I invite you to take the Mary from your Creche/Nativity scene and hold her in your hand. As Mary ponders prayerfully, I encourage you to ponder too. Can you picture Mary carefully wrapping Jesus in the swaddling clothes? This reminds me of when I was in soon-to-be parent-classes, I was taught how to, “burrito you baby.” Honestly, that is what we were told and taught and had an instructor watch over us while my wife and I performed this task. Clothes in this sense is the plural of cloth. Jesus, like all babies, was wrapped in bands or strips of cloth. One scholar said of Mary wrapping Jesus was, “Mary’s maternal care; she did for Jesus what any ancient Palestinian mother would have done for a newborn babe. Ancient Jewish and Greek sources indicate that wrapping an infant in this way was common, ordinary, and meaningful”. It showed care and was a claim of love for a child. To not wrap your baby was a sign of neglect. So, initially we see how Mary is both the God-bearer and God-care-giver.

Then there is this tension of laying Jesus in a manger, an animal feeding trough. This is not exactly the ideal crib for an infant. In this one verse, the span of a few words, there is juxtaposition of maternal care/concern in less-than-ideal conditions. As you gaze at, hold in your hand, and ponder with the figure of Mary, let her witness sing and speak to this time. To be sure, we are living in a less-than-ideal condition right now. The pandemic is keeping us away from our usual Christmas festivities. We are unable to travel or see family the way our heart desires. We feel the polarization of our country, our inability to talk to each other. All around us the world feels out-of-sync.

Yet, God didn’t wait until humans got it right to live among us, God came and ***still comes*** in the chaotic. If that sounds familiar, it is one of the meanings of Genesis 1, God creating and in cahoots with chaos. The swirling, stirring chaos in the beginning doesn’t just go away, it remains. It is woven in our personal and communal lives. Part of the divine story is chaos and creativity woven together. In some ways God entering the world in a barn is a sign of chaos. In some ways God upending the life of an unwed young woman, Mary, is part of chaos. Then, Mary, in a less-than-perfect place lovingly wraps Jesus in clothes and laid him in a manger. I pray your soul stirs at the mystery, uncertainty, the less-than-rational, the holy, the beautiful and broken all mixed into this one sacred verse. For indeed, this one verse changes everything if only we let Mary sing her song to our souls.

Prayer: God as You entered the drafty and dusty places of the world then, enter now into the less-than-perfect chaos called, “My life,” right now. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 15

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

God’s marketing strategy for spreading the good news of great joy for all people rests on shepherds. God doesn’t call up Oprah or George Clooney or LeBron James for an endorsement. God doesn’t take to Twitter or post on social media. God doesn’t buy pop up ads to appear on our computer screens. Pause for a moment to consider just how counter-cultural all this is:

First, an unwed, young woman named Mary is the God-bearer.

Second, Mary and her betrothed, Joseph, are forced to travel miles right when Mary is great with child.

Third, a drafty, dusty, dirty barn becomes the setting and scene where God makes God's grand entry.

Fourth, the Christ-child is wrapped in strips of cloth lovingly by Mary (the God-care-giver) who then lays the holy child in a common feeding trough for animals.

Finally, shepherds are the messengers – for the full weight of this head scratching/shaking statement to settle in, consider the following:

Shepherds were lowly. They were seen as thieves often letting their sheep graze on property that belonged to other people. They didn't just occupy the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder, they were not even allowed near the ladder to begin. Shepherds would band together for protection and because of shared identity – they all felt like they were least and left out of society.

In the Christmas narrative, God moves in mysterious ways that doesn't make linear, logical sense. We are so conditioned by our rational, Enlightenment, minds that we have removed all the contradictions and counter-cultural parts of the Christmas story. Yet, if God moved at the fringes and fray back then, does that mean God is still moving in ways that challenge us, push our understandings beyond where we are comfortable, and call us to let go of our score cards of who is in and who is out?

If you have a Creche scene, I invite you to take the shepherd into your hand, lean in and listen to this important messenger of God. What are the shepherds saying to you this year? I think about the Christmas Carol, "Do You Hear What I Hear". One of the verses is:

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king

Do you know what I know?

In your palace warm, mighty king

Do you know what I know?

A Child, a Child shivers in the cold

Let us bring him silver and gold

Let us bring him silver and gold

I pray that I would have open ears, heart, mind, and soul to sense what God is up to even now in my life, our church, and world.

Prayer: May the words above sink and sing from me this day, O God, I pray. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 16

⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: Luke 2:9-10

The angels swoop and stir amid the shepherds. The angels sing out with a song to sooth the shepherds who tremble with terror. When I read these two verses, I hear the brilliant line of *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The hopes, your hopes this year. The fears, your fears this year. Both find space and place in Christ’s birth.

I feel like a shepherd in the field this year. A bit lost and weary amid a year of so many changes. Separated from those I care about and unable to share hugs with those I do get to see. The challenges of navigate the world in such a time as this makes us all feel like we are traveling without a map, GPS, compass, or any kind of instrument that could help. We are in uncharted territory. There is that brilliant line of *I Wonder as I Wander*, sing it with me from your home,

I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus my Savior did come for to die
For poor on'ry people like you and like I
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

What do you wonder about as you wander around the world right now?
What hopes stir and sing within you?
What fears try to squelch or silent our hopes by belting out all that is wrong and broken right now?

I invite you to hold those questions amid the lights of “Hope,” “Peace,” and “Love” today and this week. Don’t rush to respond, but simply sit with all that is stirred by each inquiry. Ponder, like Mary, for a while; then step aside letting these questions sit on simmer in the back burner of your soul.

I pray that such wondering as we wander about our lives this day would bless us and open us to God’s hope, peace, and love in new ways.

Prayer: God of questions we don’t need to race/rush to answer, sit with us in still as we pray our hopes and fears of this year and for the coming year honestly with You. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 17

¹¹ *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.* ¹² *And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.* Luke 2:11-12

“Unto you,” those ancient words are still the promise of God’s presence in our lives today. Unto you, in your life, right now. I know that our minds can raise all kinds of objections about how we don’t feel like we are thriving, remember all those fears you thought about yesterday? Unto you, those two words are repeated in the two verses above emphasizing the importance. Into the messiness and less-than-perfectness of our lives, Christ enters.

The sign back then was a baby, a vulnerable infant under the watchful eye of his care-giver mother and father, lying in a feeding trough. That is *the sign*? Not exactly the Grand Canyon or neon

flashing lights. It is perplexing and puzzling that the sign of the sacred is a baby wrapped lovingly then laid where a baby should not be. We have the ordinary in the baffling and bewildering.

I invite you today to see where that is truth for you. Where is God moving in the ordinary in ways that don't make sense? What I am inviting you into is often called the trans-rational. Our minds, our operating systems that were installed in school, have the software of the Enlightenment. The way the Enlightenment dealt with mystery was to either explain it reasonably or throw it out as a figment of the imagination.

For example, Jesus didn't really feed five thousand with just a few loaves and fishes. Rather, everyone dug into their picnic baskets and shared some of what they had with everyone else. Makes sense.

For example, Moses didn't really part the Red Sea. Rather, it was the reeds in the Red Sea that clogged the wheels Egyptians soldiers and caused the Israelites to be set free.

I was trained in seminary to explain the Bible. When I could not, don't dare preach on *that* text. Yet, what if there is truth beyond the truth our minds can contain and comprehend? What if some experiences and encounters are contradictions and messy and leave us scratching our heads with both curiosity and frustration? What if life isn't linear and logical, but a circuitous route that makes you feel a bit dizzy and excited at the same time?

Unto you, right now in ways that may not make sense, God is entering in. Unto you, in those less-than-perfect, even fear-filled, and frustrating moment, God is entering in. That has been and still is what God is up to...if we are open to enter the mystery not to solve but to simply be.

Prayer: Unto me and to each person reading, O God, enter in we pray. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 18

¹³ *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

¹⁴ *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”* Luke 2:13-14

Music is at the heart of this holy season. This week I have quoted a few lines of Christmas carols. As we wrap up this week, I want to share this beautiful Spiritual, “Rise up Shepherd and Follow”.

*Oh, there's a star in the East on Christmas morn
Rise up, shepherd, and follow
It will lead you to the place where the Saviour's born
Rise up shepherd, and follow*

*Leave your ewes and leave your rams
Rise up shepherd, and follow
Leave your sheep and leave your lambs
Rise up, shepherd, and follow*

Follow, follow
Rise up, shepherd, and follow
Follow the star to Bethlehem
Rise up, shepherd, and follow
Come on now follow

Now, if you take good heed to the angel's word
Rise up, shepherd, and follow
You'll forget your flock, forget your herd
Rise up, shepherd, and follow
You gotta leave your ewes and leave the lambs
Rise up shepherd, and follow
You gotta leave your sheep and leave your rams
Rise up, shepherd, and follow
Follow, follow
Rise up, shepherd, and follow

These words invite us into the movement of what God is up to. A movement that starts within and flows forth from us. Christmas has both an internal and external dimension. Internally our hearts can be warmed by:

Christmas carols.

Cards.

Cookies.

Ornaments that have our parent's and grandparent's DNA on them.

Lights glowing and glistening in the night.

Presents piled under the tree.

Hold the figures of the Creche/Nativity Scene in our hands to hear each figure's story.

Please add to this list to what stirs your soul.

But our souls are not cul-de-sacs for the spirit. What we feel internally longs to be shared with those around us.

So we try to sing together, even if it is on mute on Zoom.

We mail cards.

We bake cookies to leave on someone's doorstep.

We share the story of ornaments on Zoom.

We go out looking at lights.

We shop online.

We let the story of each figure in the Nativity speak to our story.

The movement of Christmas is both inward and outward. We are the shepherds still called to rise up and follow. Or as another great Christmas Spiritual sings out, "Children Go Where I send Thee."

I pray today and in these last days before Christmas the Spirit will sing to your soul and your soul will sing out with a joyful shout that the world is about to change!

Prayer: May that last sentence, O God, be embraced and embodied in my life this day and week. Amen.