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“THE GREAT MYSTERY”

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Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

Later
after the angels,
after the stable,
after the Child,
they went back...
as we always must,
back to the world that doesn't understand
our talk of angels and stars
and especially not the Child.
We go back complaining that it doesn't last.
They went back singing praises to God!
We do have to go back,
but we can still sing the alleluias! (*Kneeling in Bethlehem, p.86*)

This poem by Ann Weems is right on target in raising the question of how we respond to the Christmas story.

What happens after Christmas? We go back to school, back to work, back to the routine. Luke tells us that after the angels quit singing, Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart, and the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for what they had seen and heard, as it had been told to them. (*Luke 1:8-21*)

Ahead of us is Epiphany. The story of the Magi is the marvelous account of those who came seeking after something more. They came, and after having found the child, they laid their gifts at his feet and worshipped him. Then they went home by another way. The implication is that they were transformed.

What about you and me? How will we go home from this Christmas? Will we pack up the ornaments and put them away in boxes and hope that we can remember where they are next year. W.H. Auden suggested in his writing *For the Time Being*, “We have entertained the vision of God coming into the world as an ‘an agreeable possibility’.” But then do we go back to business as usual?

What do we do with the Christmas story?

Let me encourage you not to leave the manger until you have let the reality of this story sink in. Beneath the characters—the shepherds, Wise Men, Mary, Joseph—the plot—going to be registered, having a child, escaping Herod, beneath all that in the old story, there is a new reality, it is a new reality which we must be open to in our lives if the Christmas story is to live among us. It is captured best by John. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God—the light that enlightens all people came into the world and the Word became flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1,14)*

This is not a story about us seeking God. This is a story about God pursuing us. The God who created us and made a world beautiful beyond our imagining has come to live with us. The God who is the creator of the heavens and the earth, the whole universe, has come to dwell with us. The miracle of Christmas is that this God will go to any limits to make contact with us, to engage us, to call us into the meaningful work of making the reality of God’s presence known in the world and to let that presence shape the world in which we live.

God comes to us where we are, bearing our heavy loads, wondering what the New Year will bring, will the economy turn around, will there be an end to the wars we are making a difficult journey back home, but will we go back another way?

The theologian, Shirley Guthrie said it well in his book, *Christian Doctrine* when he writes these words:

Nevertheless, the stories of the birth of Jesus tell us that it is into the real world of flesh-and-blood human beings that God comes-whether it can be proved and verified or not. The Christmas story is anything but the sentimental, harmless, once-a-year occasion for a “Christmas Spirit” that lasts only a few days before we return to the “facts” of “real world.”

Christmas is the story of a radical invasion of God into the kind of real world where we live all year long—a world where there is political unrest and injustice, poverty, hatred, jealousy, and both the fear and the longing that things could be different. John tells us that “the light shines in the darkness, and that kind of darkness is incapable of putting it out.” (John 1:5)

This does not happen only in the church. He came to save the world, not to condemn it but to save it. (*John 3:17*) Our faith is not based on our efforts, on what you and I do. Our faith is based on God coming to us. In Jesus Christ, we see a glimpse, who God is, where God is to be found. It is revelation! It is not something that we can tell ourselves but something that God has made known to us in Jesus Christ.

One of the great insights of the theologian Karl Barth was that most religion is about people seeking God. The Christian faith tells about a revelation from God which reveals God’s very self to us. We call it “The Great Mystery of the Incarnation.” It is a mystery that we do not fully comprehend. We may try but it is beyond our imaginations that God would become one of us. We get it confused sometimes we talk about Jesus as being half God or half man. He is truly fully human and fully divine. I will candid with you that I do not fully understand what this means.

It reminds me of the story of one of my fellow students who fell asleep in a seminary class years ago when we were discussing predestination. The professor woke him up and asked him to please explain predestination. The student could not answer only saying he had forgotten. The professor looked up to the heavens and said, “Oh God, only one person in the world has ever understood predestination and now he has forgotten.”

The mystery of God coming among us is something that we need to wrestle with everyday of our lives. We begin by admitting the absurdity of it. Martin Luther said that when God wanted to address humankind, God did so first in baby talk. It was Luther who said, “Look upon baby Jesus. All subsequent chatter of learned theologians is but a series of footnotes on the primal baby talk.” Or as Karl Barth said, “When we think about God we often think about the highest, the absolute, the ultimate, some mysterious abstraction. But the God remembered at Christmas is a God with a name, a God with a human face.” I might add a God with diapers to change, who got hungry, who cried, who laughed.

What does this mean for our lives? It means that God invites each one of us to be apart of this divine project of the Word becoming flesh among us.

In a few moments, we shall baptize three young men, Nino, Shaka and Kai. We will claim for them the promises of God. They are all precocious, delightful children. But, they do not understand what is happening to them. What we can tell them is that they are being claimed by a God who loves them and us so much that God came into the world to make this world more like the place that God intended it to be. “Thy will be done,” we pray, “on earth as it is in heaven.” We are going to help them live in this world by telling them stories about ancient Israelites, who lived as exiles and came home to a new beginning. Stories about Jesus who was a teacher, a preacher and a healer, who was crucified because he was feared, but God raised him from the dead. These are stories that will help them as they make their way through life, as they run into the challenges that they will surely face them. These are the stories that enable us to live through hard times.

These are the kind of the stories that we come here on Sunday morning to hear together, “the good news” of the Gospel we know and try to understand. We also try to live it and practice it in our lives. If there was ever a time that the world needs to hear these stories it is now.

When everyone is scared about our savings accounts and about the economy, we need to hear stories about a God who is with us in good and bad times. A God who can take a difficult economic situation and use it to help us reorient our lives. God can teach us that the most important things are not the things that we can buy, but the most important things are the relationships we build. We can learn to live by grace and truth. These are realities that you will not find offered on a street corner. These are the stories that we will tell these three young men, and we will continue to tell to our children and ourselves. There is a better way for us to order our lives.

You have to have a sense of humor to live in this world. When a man like Bernie Madoff, made off with a lot of people’s money and created a situation that not only affects this country but people around the world. Our lives are so intertwined that bad mortgages in California can cause the economy to go down in Iceland. We found out in a new way that what the Bible says is true, there is one God who has created us all and we are all in this together. We can blame Bernie Madoff and others who made a lot of

money, but we have all bought into that dream of having the good life, having things better than our parents. Making a lot of money was the way to get to the good life was the bill of goods we bought into.

Maybe refocusing our lives and seeing the meaning and purpose of life expressed in a child born in a remote corner of the world who dared to say, “Show me where your treasure is and I will show you where your heart is, what is really important to you,” said Jesus.

I think our beepers are going off folks. People in the world want to know if we have any good news, a word for such a time as this. As we teach it to our children, as we write it on our hearts, may we live it. May we practice it. May we practice the incarnation by reaching out in God’s name to those in need around this church and around the world, to reach out and to say there is a better way for us to live and to order our lives.

Two messages that drive this home for me. One is from the African American scholar and poet, Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among brothers and sister,
 To make music in the heart. (*The Mood of Christmas, p23*)

What we are called upon to do, first of all, as the Westminster Catechism told us so long ago, is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. In other words, to praise God, the writer of Ephesians says for all the things God has done for us, our lives should be lived out of praise.

Finally a word from our friend from South Africa, Peter Story, who wrote in a Christmas letter this week to me:

So this season of incarnation is needed to remind us that there is only one incorruptible kingdom and only one true Lord. All the others must be measured by the degree to which they reflect his teaching and his Spirit. It is good that we all need to bow low to enter his stable. May your year be deeply blessed by his presence and his love.

May we continue to sing God's praise as we join God in this incredible project of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us full of grace and truth.

Thanks be to God for the Great Mystery of the Incarnation and may it live in our hearts, our congregation and our world. Amen.