

Christmas Eve 2023

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A Hundred Times Before

This is the night, the night that Advent becomes Christmas. This is the night that the One we have been waiting for is born in a Bethlehem stable.

Everything and everyone is ready, or as ready as can be. Nativity creches are nearly complete. Christmas trees are brightly, beautifully decorated, gifts are wrapped, stockings are hung, cards have been exchanged and carols echo in our ears as they are heard absolutely everywhere. This is the night we gather together in joyful praise and celebration, in worship and adoration, as we sing and light a candle and tell a story--- the story that you have heard a hundred times before.

You have heard the story by itself from Luke's Gospel and mashed up with other stories in Christmas pageants and Hollywood movies.

You have heard it in carols older than the printing press and common literacy so the joyous news weaves the gospels of Matthew and Luke and John as understood from the oral tradition.

You have heard the story in the archaic and poetic language of King James as Linus stood under a spotlight in a school auditorium near the sad little Charlie Brown Christmas tree atop Schroeder's piano.

You have heard and told the story while caroling on lawns and front porches.

This is a story we know by heart.

In Jesus Christ, God puts aside all glory and majesty to come into this broken, dangerous, complicated world among an oppressed people in an occupied land, to parents who are very far from home and lodging with donkeys, cows, sheep and goats, since the emperor decided to have a census which mandated that people returned to their ancestral homelands to be counted.

Sometime in the night, in the most absurd and unclean situation, God's newborn cry will be heard. That very same breath that swept over the waters in the beginning when the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep now cries as a healthy baby boy. Held closely by Mary, God is kept warm and comfortable and well fed. God is washed and dried and swaddled and laid in a manger. And God falls asleep.

Yes, this is indeed the story we have heard a hundred times before. This is a story that we know by heart. And I wonder if we've gotten so used to this story that we just kind of gloss over the fact that this really is an outrageous story.

There are folklore stories and mythologies about gods who come into our world who look like humans, or who are the children of gods and humans, and sometimes we make this story into one of those stories. We retell this story in a way that makes this baby into something less than what he was. We try to tame God as gentle Jesus, meek and mild, away in a manger, asleep on the hay, no crying he makes. But that is not this story.

Because a foundation of our faith is that we find God, the One who called the worlds into being, who created and sustains the incomprehensible wonder of the universe that surrounds us, the shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters, is fully, completely, and absolutely divine; and is fully, completely, and absolutely human.

In Christ, God breathes and yawns and smiles. God laughs and God cries. God spits up. God crawls. God takes his first steps. God plays. God says his first words, 'imma and abba.'

With imma and abba God grows up in Nazareth among his oppressed people in an occupied land. God is baptized and God is tempted. God prays and teaches and heals and welcomes and feeds thousands and calms stormy seas. God gives thanks as he shares bread and wine and asks to be remembered. God is betrayed and arrested and crucified and resurrected.

But God does not do any of this alone. Already there are angels announcing good news to shepherds and wise men have begun to follow a brilliant star. Imma and abba are seeking a warm and safe place for God to be born tonight.

Then there will be John the Baptist and the disciples and the followers and the crowds. There will be Martha and Mary and Lazarus. There will be Pharisees and Sadducees and Judas and Herod and Pontius Pilate. There will be Mary discovering an empty tomb.

There will be Paul and Lydia and Stephen. There will be Augustine and Hildegard and Martin Luther and the amazing grace of John Newton.

And there will be so many more through the centuries who find their story in God's story, who learn to be the body of Christ in outstretched hands and empty bowls and lonely hearts as they learn to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly the best that they can.

This is the night when we hear the story we have heard a hundred times before, a story that is an invitation when we hear it in all the ways that it is outrageous and absurd. This is not a story about a God who is tucked away in the distant heavens or segregated from humanity. This is the story of divine and human God, and everything that comes with that. God incarnate is infusing the cracks of the brokenness and flawed good creation with love and light, and invites us, the body of Christ, to join in, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to free those who are oppressed, to declare that there is peace and goodwill all around us.

On this night, in our midst, a revolution against the world-as-it-is and in favor of the world-as-God-is-calling-it-to-be, will be born. For a child has been born for us a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace..... Amen.