

What speaks to you? Luke 2: 1 – 20

Christmas Eve 2011 Parkdale United Church

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What is it in the Christmas story that speaks to you this year? Are there particular characters or events in the Christmas story that capture your imagination, move your heart, inspire your spirit, that call you to a new sense of faith or hope?

Is it the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph? Life is not unfolding in ways they had anticipated or planned. Yes, they were engaged to be married, and one can imagine they were making plans about the life they would share together -- a home in Nazareth, a family, work and community life. And all of a sudden, everything changes. Mary is with child. An angel tells Mary the baby is holy, the Son of God. She is told they are to name him Jesus, a name when literally translated means God delivers, God rescues, God saves. And Mary trusted God. And Joseph trusted God. Is it the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph that speaks to you? Is it the way Mary and Joseph trust God's goodness that is particularly inspiring in a world that is too often suspicious, skeptical, doubting, and not trusting? Emmanuel, God with us!

Is it the first words out of the angel's mouth, "Be not afraid"? The Christmas story is littered with angels and angel encounters; and at every angel visitation, the first words out of the angel's mouth, "Be not afraid." An angel visits the old priest, Zechariah, to tell him his prayers are answered. His aged wife Elizabeth was to have a baby, they were to name him John, and he would become a great prophet for God. John would prepare the way, introduce God's anointed one, the long awaited Messiah. And Zechariah, "Be not afraid." An angel visits Joseph with news of Mary's pregnancy, visits Mary to tell her of the child she will bear, visits shepherds on a dark desolate hillside, proclaiming good news for all people, the birth of a Savior, Christ the Lord, and the angel said, "Be not afraid." It is those words, "Be not afraid," that we so long to hear, need to hear, want to hear in a world that is too often frightening, threatening, violent and uncertain. Be not afraid!

What is it in the Christmas story that speaks to you this year? Is it the quiet gentleness of the nativity scene? We know the story by heart. We can see the events unfold. We can picture mother Mary holding the newborn child to her breast, Joseph smiling lovingly at the child with a supportive arm around Mary, a warm glow from a heavenly light illumines the shed. The animals – sheep, cattle, donkeys, and doves – are gathered around, looking upon the holy family with a certain reverence and care. Even the often boisterous ill-mannered shepherds radiate a certain gentle kindness and speak in whispered excitement about what the angels had said about the child. I know – that is an idealized, romanticized depiction of the nativity scene. Maybe we cling to that artificial sanitized image because we generally only read this story on Christmas Eve, and we usually hear it in settings like this sanctuary, where there is a sacred gentleness, where we are in the company of faith and love, hope and peace, and so we

project some of those same feelings back into the story. We all know a more honest and realistic picture of the nativity would be radically different. A crowded stable full of animals and people is not quiet and peaceful; it is more likely to be smelly and noisy and chaotic. Birthing is not an easy gentle process – natural, yes, but often difficult, painful and frightening. Yet most of us, in hearing this beloved story, in imagining the nativity scene, cling to feelings of quiet gentleness, a peaceful sense of warmth and well-being. Could it be that those are some of our deepest longings in a world that is too often noisy and chaotic and impersonal? Could it be that deep down inside each of us, we desperately yearn for a safe place of warmth and love, a place to be embraced in peace and care?

What is it in the Christmas story that speaks to you this year? For me, it is the interruptions that seem to be holding my attention. The story is filled with interruptions. Caesar interrupts everything calling the whole world to census and, to make it even more inconvenient, he requires each person to register in the city of their family lineage. So Joseph, with a very pregnant Mary, must travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Angels interrupt life with news that God is answering prayers, creating life in mysterious ways, gifting the world with a Savior. It seems to me that part of the Christmas message is that God interrupts life. God interrupts history to be born and live among us. I think the enduring miracle of Christmas is God keeps interrupting, again and again, interrupting our lives and our world with hope and love, justice and peace, joy and well-being. I understand interruptions. My life seems to be filled with interruptions. Some of them are pleasant and lovely, others are difficult, hurtful and troubling. It is encouraging for me to know that God is in the interruptions. It changes everything to trust that God is in the interruptions, that God is with us, is in the midst of it all, and we are not alone. It makes all the difference in the world; God interrupting to birth life, God interrupting to create hope, God interrupting to awaken justice, God interrupting to bring peace and secure well-being in you, in me and in the world. What caught my attention this Christmas is holy interruptions.

What is in the Christmas story that speaks to you this year?