

Christmas Eve 12/24/09

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

Thank you for coming tonight. Thank you for putting aside all that there is to do to be here. Here where we ponder together the meaning of this night.

If you feel rushed and are aware of how much there is still for you to do, I invite you to take this time to stop, breathe, wait, and be present here. Be here, at home.

Whether you are a regular at ALC, or occasionally visit us, you are welcome. We are all together here. We come to wonder at the story of angels and shepherds hearing of a birth of the Christ Child, who will bring great joy. The stories in the New Testament about Jesus' birth were written about 100 years after Jesus' life. It may not have happened exactly this way. But, in this birth, the course of the world, in fact was changed, people believed that God had come to earth and lived and died for love, inviting us to love that way.

The picture postcard view of the Nativity is peaceful. A snapshot as a moment in time shows all is well.

Life is not like that, much of the time, as we know. Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor imagines this in her Christmas Eve sermon, titled "Past Perfection": ...

That is when the picture was taken—right then, while the star was still overhead and the angels were still singing in the rafters.

But twenty minutes later, what? The hole in the heavens had closed up and the only music came from the bar at the inn. One of the cows stepped on a chicken and the resulting racket made the baby cry. As she leaned over to pick him up, Mary started crying too and when Joseph tried to comfort her she told him she wanted her mother. If she had just married a nice boy from Nazareth, she said, she would be back home where she belonged instead of competing with sheep for a place to sleep.

Then she said she was sorry and Joseph said not to think another thing about it. He meant it, too. They both hurt all over and there was nothing to eat and it was cold as the dickens, but you know what? God was still there, right in middle of the picture. Peace was there, and joy and love—not only in the best of times, and also, and especially in the worst of time... (*Home by Another Way*, pp. 23-3)

The world today faces many imponderables, and challenges; will there be war or peace; will people have enough or will poverty and illness and malnutrition continue; will people have work and health care, will we care for God's creation? Perhaps never before have there been so many huge questions, challenges, and problems besetting humanity.

Some of you here tonight may be in difficulty, anxious, grieving. We know that even though a new born baby's cry changed life forever, still humanity has not caught up to the promise of that birth.

But, trusting in that promise is what Christmas is about. And, that will change your life. It will bring comfort, adventure, challenge, risk, and surprise. You do not know where the love of Jesus will take you.

Religion and faith are about trust and relationship, with the creator of the world, who is love. Of God there are many definitions: St. Augustine described the nature of **God** as a circle **whose center is everywhere, and its circumference nowhere.**" Theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich spoke of God as the ground of being. Jesus, whom Christians believe showed God's love fully lived out in a human being, is described as the Beloved, the Rock, Living Water, the Prince of Peace, soul friend.

Who is Jesus to you? What place does God have in your life? Placing God at the center of your life is the goal of religion. But discovering who God is and who you are—all this is worthy of a lifetime's work, worship and prayer—all part of building the relationship.

Religion has recently been known around the world for divisiveness and self-righteousness, even for terror. But at heart the Christian religion is about filling what one poet has described as the "god-sized hole in our hearts." It's about answering a deep yearning for meaning and commitment; it's about believing in love and justice for all people and creation. It's about another famous quote from St. Augustine" "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

It's about finding a community of people who believe in God's love, who want to know Jesus, and who want to take the risk of following that love. And who feel that the world will be better because of their risk.

Christianity is about trust that the improbable happens.

It's about trust that even in darkness in the world and our lives that there is always light.

It's about trust that it is a good thing to try to follow Jesus' teachings: to pray for enemies, pray and work for God's kingdom of peace and justice; to be part of the change for which the world yearns; to want to be com (with) passionate and walk in others' shoes, even though this means more suffering with them and risk to ourselves—to our complacency and self-satisfaction.

Christianity is about trust in the journey, as the shepherds and wise men trusted, and Mary and Joseph trusted, not knowing where we are going, but knowing that life's meaning and purpose will be fulfilled in that journey.

It's about the courage to look at ourselves to see what is not consistent with love and to try to change.

It's about becoming more loving, joyful, patient, kind.

It's about taking the time to stop, to pray in whatever way comes naturally, to ponder (think deeply).

It's about seeing God's life in all things: the frog, the bear, and whales.

It's about thinking and reading about God, about the great women and men of faith, and studying the Bible.

It's about realizing over time that birth and life in God's love is not easy; our hearts will break as we become more aware of others' suffering and every creature's desire for joy.

It's about welcoming the stranger, forgiving others, and at the same time being surprised by joy.

It's about joy, and sometimes ecstasy.

But it's about saying yes to the truth that, Jesus was not born to make life easy, but to make man and woman great.

Happy Christmas!