

God With Us—Never Without Us

Christmas Eve 2019

On this holy night, we gather to hear the ancient story when God in love sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save it. The story of our salvation, a song of breathtaking joy, a story and song of light and hope. We come for different reasons. We're here to worship and fall on our knees in gratitude and praise. We're here because it's tradition, we like the light and shadows of this service. We want a silent night, a moment of calm to pause and take stock of our lives, remember Christmases long ago, the people we miss this night. Maybe you're here because this has been a tough year, the world seems especially dark these days, the nation is divided and we're bracing for the year ahead, maybe things appear to be falling apart on the inside or on the outside, and you're looking for some light—even just a glimmer of light—a little hope.

I can't give you that light or hope. No pastor or priest can. No church can, either. This light or hope is not in any pastor, priest, or church. But we can do is point toward it, we can bear witness to it and that's ultimately what we're doing this evening. We preach tidings of great joy. We tell the story—again and again. “Do you see what I see? Do you hear what I hear? Do you know what I know?” Can you see what we see? Can you hear what we hear? Do you know what we know? Do you know it—really know that to you a savior is born. To *you*—to all of you, to *y'all*—is born a savior. The text is plural, which means it includes everyone. To us, for us, with us, a savior—to *you*, for *you*, with *you*.

Do you know—really know in the core of your being, not your head, in your heart, in your gut—the savior's deep and abiding, fierce and tenacious love for you? This is the tidings of great joy the angels sing about. And, to be honest, it pains me, it breaks my heart, actually, to meet people who have never heard this good news, or can't hear this news, or have forgotten this part of the gospel, or know and have rejected it because they think they are somehow unlovable. As John wrote in his Gospel, as he knew in his bones, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that world might be saved through him (John 3:17). Yes, God sent the Son because God is love (1 John 4:8), *and* God sent the Son because you and I are worth the journey, we're worth saving. The two go together. Contemporary writer Sue Monk Kidd gets to the heart of the matter. She discovered in her journey into God, that: “God's love is so immense and powerful,” she says, “so tender and dazzling with joy, that most of us have only felt the hem of it. We have underestimated its power, its availability, its passion. Likewise we have underestimated our ability to tap into it.”¹

Why is it so difficult for the “the soul to know its worth”?² I know far too many Christians who struggle to hear this word, and I know folks who used to be Christian but are no longer because they never heard about the love—the judgment, yes, but never the love—people who never really heard the angel's announcement to the shepherds, never heard good news, the *evangel*, a word that is really evangelical (in the truest meaning of that word), people who never heard from a pulpit or in Sunday School or in their family about their inherent worth and value as children of God.

You and I matter in the eyes of God. We are worth the risk, the hurt, the rejection, the suffering of the Son because the Son risked the hurt and rejection and suffering and even death to show us that we are the *object* of God's love, the apple of God's eye (Psalm 17:8). What if when we sing *Joy to the World* we remember that we, too, are the joy of God's world? You and I matter. Are we broken and wounded and fragile and imperfect and selfish and insecure and fearful? Sure. Of course. Absolutely. But that doesn't matter. All of this might be true at any given moment, but it doesn't replace or remove what is *always* true—that nevertheless, we bear the image of God. The birth of Jesus means that being born, being *human*, is holy. You are worthy of love because God's love makes you worthy. To reject our worth is to reject God. Your humanity, your existence, right now, matters to God.

In fact, as theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) reminded us again and again, the astounding message of Christmas, of God's Incarnation, is this: "The divine being and life and act takes place with ours," he wrote, "and it is only as the divine takes place that ours takes place. To put it in the simplest way, what unites God and us men [and women] is that [God] does not will to be God without us,..."³ *God does not will to be God without us*. With us—never without us.

The good news is that God isn't aloof, apart, or separate from us. God has come close and always wants to get close, to share our breath, our hopes and dreams, to give us life, to awaken us and call us to life—*why?*—so that we know our inherent worth as children of God—*why?*—so that our lives can then be given for the world, for our neighbor in love, especially in these dark days. For, like the child we celebrate this night, none of us were born for ourselves to do whatever we want; like this child, we were created to reveal the glory of God and reflect that glory, reflect God's light with our lives, as souls, by God's grace, who know our worth. When this happens others might come to know what we know and celebrate this holy night. It's the gift God continues to give through you and me. So, joy to the world. Joy to you!

¹ Sue Monk Kidd, *God's Joyful Surprise: Finding Yourself Loved* (HarperOne, 2016), 2.

² From "O Holy Night," music by Adolphe Adam (1803-1856). Original text by poet Placide Cappeau (1808-1877). John Sullivan Dwight (1813-1893) revised the text for English in 1855.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 7.