

In Those Days *Christmas Eve 2020*

It's always a challenge to bring new words to this wonder of all wonders that we celebrate tonight, the Word made flesh. I confess that I'm feeling especially inadequate to convey the meaning of this night. Incarnation. The birth of Jesus Christ, this story—God with us, in the flesh—stretches our imagination. It's especially tough this year, on this Christmas Eve that feels so odd and strange and at some level, just plain wrong—wrong not to be together in worship tonight in the sanctuary, surrounded by candlelight and music. You know. You know what the past nine months have been like moving through this pandemic, the anxiety and fear, the sadness and loss. We as a congregation have witnessed considerable loss this year, loss that we feel most keenly this Christmas Eve. As I shared several weeks ago, the minor-keyed hymns of Advent-waiting have taken on greater resonance and meaning this year. These are dark times, and the winter months might be darker still.

In times like these all preachers, if they're honest, acknowledge their limitations. We're thrown back to the essence of the message, the story, the Word-itself. Sometimes the preacher needs to be silent. Sometimes the preacher needs to step down from the pulpit, move into the pew and listen along with the congregation and wait together for the Word to be heard in and among the words. Sometimes what we need most is just to hear the story.

So let us listen to the story, these words from the Gospel of Luke and, later, the opening words of John's Gospel. Familiar, maybe too familiar. But listen again, listen afresh, listen to the story, listen without interpretation. Allow the story to wash over you, move you, pull on you, tug on you, touch you. Listen for the Divine Word in the words, surrender to it, receive it. Allow the Word to enter you, to take root in you, form within you, come to life, be born—born again?—in you, through you. For tonight, of all nights, now more than ever, we need a word that only God can speak, a word that speaks to our fear, a word that tells us we are not alone, a word that says despite all that is going on there is still reason for great joy in this world. For God is with us. A savior has been born to us. And the light of Christ shines all the brighter in darkness and shadow.

Listen:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of

David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ *‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’*

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (Luke 2:1-20).

Listen:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.... ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:1-5, 14, 16).

Thanks be to God!