

St James United Church



Message for December 24, 2024

Christmas Eve, Carols and Communion Service

Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Luke 2:1-19; "Earth and Heaven" by Susan Palo Cherwien

Have you considered how ordinary Jesus' birth was? Now I don't mean the events surrounding it. Both Matthew and Luke, from whom we get much of our religious Christmas imagery, place extraordinary circumstances either side of his birth. Matthew has an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream, and then, at some point after, magi come from the East. Luke has angels before and after like bookends to the story, Gabriel coming to Mary, then angels appearing to some shepherds in the fields. But in each, the birth itself gets a couple of lines at best. Even John and his cosmic poem of the Divine Word bringing all creation into being simply says that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. Like I said, ordinary.

But what about the stable? It's not ordinary for a baby to be born like that. It's not. It wasn't then either. We picture it that way based on two things. One, the projection of our expectations on where a feeding trough is supposed to be kept and two, the choice to render a Greek word that more accurately refers to an upper room in someone's home, as an inn, a resting lodge for travellers. And so even here, there is something quite ordinary about Mary and Joseph being welcomed in amongst a family, who, as was customary in the time, had space for animals in the lower part of their home to keep them safe in inclement weather. Just an ordinary birth.

And this is where the wonder comes in. The birth is ordinary, but the child born, we are told by angels, first to Mary then shepherds, is Son of the Most High, Christ the Lord, our Saviour. And yet Jesus always referred to himself as the Son of Man, the Human One. Why? Because even though we see a horizon dividing earth from heaven, as suggested in our opening poem that belief in a separation between God and us is something we've placed onto our reality. Jesus saw it differently, saw his humanity as an expression of his divinity, even with all of our human hang ups and missteps and vulnerabilities, ordinary human lives a source of divine blessing.

I find great comfort in that because for the longest time I was taught to look down on all of that in me, to see the divine as separate, distant from me as a sinner, held in some kind of perfection that I need to reach for as I set the ordinariness of my life aside. In that mode,

Jesus' birth was part of a process to free me from all that human weakness and bridge the gap between heaven and earth. And we get the ramifications of that teaching in our world as we aspire to rise above the mundane, to become extraordinary and set apart through wealth or power. Even divisions in our world can be traced to that separation, some people considered closer to God than others. But no one and no thing is closer to or further from God. That is what the story shows us, as God is revealed in a newborn, held to Mary's breast, revealed to shepherds who were looked down on by many. There is no gap. Rather all the world shines in God. My life shining, your lives shining, every life shining with God's radiance, our humanity a source of divine blessing.

Jesus spent his adult ministry helping us look for that radiance, to see that the reign of God is not beyond us but right inside of us, the ordinary things of our lives windows into God's heart. A simple act of hospitality, like the offer of a cup of water, is an act of grace. Eating bread and drinking wine is how God feeds us. When ordinary people get together, even just two or three of them, God shows up.

I need to know this because so often the world feels other than this, our news headlines not much different than the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, with an emperor presuming he had the authority to disrupt everyone's lives. People divided from one another, or at least some trying to make us feel that we are apart. As one tragic event happens after another, it can feel like God is far away and yet God is close, present in the simple things we do, welcoming those displaced by a war, holding up a blank page in protest, delivering a Christmas hamper, visiting someone who is lonely, each beginning in God's presence shining within us, that light strengthened as they do the same, ordinary things yet signs of grace.

On this night we celebrate that God came to us in Jesus, a vulnerable baby also a saviour. Jesus was indeed born to save us. But not by taking away our humanity. Rather by affirming it, God present in the ordinariness of our lives, each of us a gift of grace and blessing to the world. May we ponder the wonder that this is. As we live it out, we share the true gift of Christmas. Amen.