

Summerland United Church December 24th Christmas Eve Reflection

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Threshold

Welcome, friends, to this special time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. This year in this church, we have been spending time preparing for the birth of Christ by becoming more “present.” You can see we have many presents here in the sanctuary. Being surrounded by them all Advent long has helped us be inspired to be more present — to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

It all started with the idea that we can spend a lot of time worrying about finding the perfect Christmas gifts. Deep down we want people in our lives to know they are special and that we love them. But sometimes we overlook the greatest gift of all... our very presence.

Relationship is the most needed gift in our world. In this year when the fourth week of Advent also falls on Christmas Eve, it is appropriate that we focus on both love and light in this service. Loneliness and isolation is, according to some experts, the “pandemic of our time.” So no matter how able you are to offer gifts that the world considers “valuable,” really what we need the most is simply to “be with.” That is what one of the names for Jesus — “Emmanuel” —means: “God with us.” And this love and light is the best gift of all.

First Gospel Reading

Luke 1: 26-38

Reader: The Child of Love comes from the most humble of families, though we are sure to be informed by the gospel writer that Joseph was from the lineage of David, who built a house for God in his time. Mary’s womb became a house of the holy in hers. She accepts the role she is given... to be Present with Love growing inside of her.

Six months later, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a young woman named Mary; she was engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. Upon arriving, the angel said to Mary, “Rejoice, highly favored one! God is with you! Blessed are you among women!” Mary was deeply troubled by these words and wondered what the angel’s greeting meant. The angel went on to say to her, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You’ll conceive and bear a son, and give him the name Jesus — ‘Deliverance.’ His dignity will be great, and he will be called the Only Begotten of God. God will give Jesus the judgment seat of David, his ancestor, to rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his reign will never end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have never been with a man?” The angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you — hence the offspring to be born will be called the Holy One of God. Know too that Elizabeth, your kinswoman, has conceived a child in her old age; she

who was thought to be infertile is now in her sixth month. Nothing is impossible with God.” Mary said, “I am the servant of God. Let it be done to me as you say.” With that, the angel left her.

Second Gospel Reading

Luke 2: 1-14, (15-20)

Reader: As we have considered the presence of God in Advent, we have encountered an image that winds itself through the scriptures — that of the gentle presence of the Holy holding us close as a shepherd holds a lamb. And tonight the image of those shepherds — who know how to care deeply in each present moment with the flock — are again at the center of the story. They are the ones who first hear the Good News. And while the light initially frightens them, they run toward it, not away. Hear the story from the Gospel of Luke:

In those days, Caesar Augustus published a decree ordering a census of the whole Roman world. This first census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All the people were instructed to go back to the towns of their birth to register. And so Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to “the city of David” — Bethlehem, in Judea, because Joseph was of the house and lineage of David; he went to register with Mary, his espoused wife, who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her delivery. She gave birth to her firstborn, a son; she put him in a simple cloth wrapped like a receiving blanket, and laid him in a feeding trough for cattle, because there was no room for them at the inn. There were shepherds in the area living in the fields and keeping night watch by turns over their flock. The angel of God appeared to them, and the glory of God shone around them; they were very much afraid. The angel said to them, “You have nothing to fear! I come to proclaim good news to you — news of a great joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in David’s city, a savior — the Messiah — has been born to you. Let this be a sign to you: you’ll find an infant wrapped in a simple cloth, lying in a manger.” Suddenly, there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in high heaven! And on earth, peace to those on whom God’s favor rests.” When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go straight to Bethlehem and see this event that God has made known to us.” They hurried and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger; once they saw this, they reported what they had been told concerning the child. All who heard about it were astonished at the report given by the shepherds. Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart. The shepherds went away glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told.

Reflection:

Throughout the Advent season I have very intentionally included many different images of Nativity scenes from around the world, to keep us present to the story we're preparing for. And I intentionally chose images where Jesus and Mary and all the

people in the story were black, indigenous, Asian, Australian, African and European because this story resonates with Christians all over the globe. We tell it and retell it every year, with the invitation to be *in* the story, to be present *at and with* the story, just as people all over the planet do so as well. And so this story begins to look the tellers of the story.



For us here in Summerland, what would our nativity look like? How would we envision our nativity?

Would we choose this image before us right now? Mary a strong proud black woman?



Or perhaps the image from the first scripture reading where Mary was young, faithful, and Latina?



Would we consider this one – Urban, homeless, and a little unsavoury?

We know from the telling of these stories that Mary and Joseph were young, Mary pregnant and unwed, forced to travel from their home and family to an unknown place where there was nowhere for them to stay. In our modern nativity, these new parents may very well have looked like this. And would any respectable person give them a room?

We idealize the barn with our hymns, and we sanitize the birth with images of serene and calm parents and a baby that doesn't cry. A baby that doesn't cry.



I expect the aftermath of Jesus birth to be a little more like this, a slightly more honest portrayal of new parents.

We lose a lot when we idealize this story, when we remove the humanity and all the messiness that comes with humanity – because when it's perfect, clean and tidy – and we're a mess – how can we be a part of it?

We've been talking all this month about how the perfect Christmas present isn't

something that is bought in a store and covered over in shiny paper – but rather the perfect present is you. And your presence in the world- and let's face it – we probably don't think we're perfect. No matter what I say up here, no matter what we sing or read about at a service we know we're messy, fallible, imperfect people. And we may very well consider ourselves unworthy of being a part of this beautiful and divine story.

But there is nothing perfect about the nativity story when you really stop to think about it. Mary and Joseph were young, unmarried, homeless. The shepherds were the lowest members of society, equally as homeless from spending their days and nights in the fields. All of them would have been filthy and smelled pretty bad.

There would have been shouts and groans from Mary, pain and fear, animals stomping their feet, dogs barking, rats scurrying about in the shadows. There would have been blood and tears, mess and hardship – because that is what it means to bring life into the world.

God entered the world in the most human of ways, experiencing the fullness of what it means to be a human being – pain, fear, hardship, tears – and unbelievable relief when it was all over.

Absolute Joy, unconditional love, endless hope, and breathtaking peace as everything around you settles.

This is life. This is who we are and what we are present too every day of our lives. And God is present. God is with us. God knows this and shows us through the stories we tell ever year – the messiest, more imperfect, those lacking in self-confidence, those who think they are unworthy and unlovable is where my presence with be found the most. These are the people I bring light too.

That's us. That's me, that's you.

This season is so frustratingly contradictory – I can say all of these things and I believe all of these things, but I'll still go home and see those ads – the last minute perfect gift ads, I'll worry over stocking stuffers and whether the turkey will be too dry, or the gravy lumpy – because Christmas is supposed to be a 'certain way.'

And if it's not perfect and serene, doesn't sparkle or sparkles too much – I've done something wrong.



And so I try to go back to these images of an imperfect nativity, exhausted and overwhelmed parents and I try to cut myself some slack, give myself a break on perfection – not because I don't care.

I do care. I do – Christmas is a miracle each and every year. Somehow the mystery of our faith renews itself every year – Christ is born. Christ has died. Christ has come again. When I care about that, when I'm present to that. When we are present with this, with each other and with God – then the imperfect is perfect.



Look at this woman. And look at the world she inhabits. The sky is dark and storm clouds obscure the sun. The walls are covered in graffiti, the floor is filthy, and there's an angry rodent hissing behind her. She doesn't have enough clothes, she looks cold; her skirt is stained – nothing about her or her world is beautiful or perfect.

She knows this, she accepts it and is determined to be strong and confront this imperfect world with Absolute Joy, unconditional love, endless hope, and the breathtaking peace that comes with becoming

present with God, giving the presence of light space in the gloom to glow and to grow. Shortly we'll sing a hymn that will contrast everything I just said -we'll return to the sanitized and shiny Christmas story – and we'll risk falling back into the belief that we need to be tidy and shiny ourselves. But let's not let that happen, we'll take with us our perfect imperfections – knowing that God is with us – God is present in our imperfect and precious lives. And we are invited into the precious presence of Emmanuel, born anew for us this day.

May it be so.