

**Christmas Message
December 24, 2018
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“Mistletoe.” It is the “safe” word that the couple Brad and Kate use from the movie “Four Christmases” when they need to tap out of the four dysfunctional Christmas celebrations they attend with their extended families. It was their signal to one another that they were done, that it was all just too much, and folks, I’m calling it tonight: Mistletoe. The Christmas music has been piping out the store speakers for over two months now. Our family has successfully binged three seasons of Holiday Baking Championship, watched around 44 Christmas movies give or take a few, and eaten something like 300 versions of sugar dyed red, green and everything in between. The Christmas budget has been blown, and all is gaudily giftwrapped ready to be put under the tree. It has been a combination of a sprint and marathon to plan and attend all the events, and I’m crying out Mistletoe!

It’s not that I don’t love it. I was glued to every episode of the Holiday Baking Championship, dreaming of all the beautiful concoctions that I will never make. But you really can have too much of a good thing. Additionally, as a clergy person, I’ve spent the last month trying, sometimes in vain, to create space for worshipping God rather than consumerism/consumption and dial down the volume for the quiet expectation and waiting of Advent. As a member of our culture, yes, I’ve been blaring the Christmas tunes and shopping with the best of them. But by this point, I’ve got whiplash from the ups and downs of the season, and I feel the chasm growing wider and wider between the religious and secular celebrations of the holiday season.

And I suppose that is one of the gifts of a Christmas Eve service. Most of the noise and hustle and bustle is dying down now, and it grows darker and quieter. It creates breathing room for us to gather and reconnect with the birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us. Most of us have heard the story over and over again, so much so that the words can run together. We’ve memorized the stories and images of the nativity scene: the angels, an Inn filled to capacity, a birth in a stable, visits from the shepherds and gifts from the wise men.

In our exhaustion from the acrobatics of the season, it is easy to glaze over the details at this point, but this year, I have been particularly taken by this wild notion that God came to be one of us in the form of a baby. In theological circles when



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we talk about the Incarnation, we tend to think about the aspects of an adult Jesus who is both fully human and fully divine. His humanity makes him more relatable and identifiable to us, and his divinity makes him more loving and powerful than we think possible in a human being.

I think most of us are familiar with the idea that God came to be with us to be closer to us, to become more accessible to us, and to reconcile with us. God had seen the mistakes and brokenness of humanity and decided to walk among us to set a different kind of example and to help us understand God a little better. As New Testament scholar and historian John Dominic Crossan said, “Jesus is God in sandals.” But more recently, I’m captivated by the idea of God’s complete vulnerability in the nativity story. Not only did God choose to take human form, but God came as the most helpless of human forms - an infant. Jesus didn’t raise himself. He was completely dependent on the love and nurture of human beings, deeply flawed human beings.

Seventeen years ago, I was pregnant with my daughter. I remember sitting in church that Christmas Eve, pondering what Mary’s pregnancy must have been like. I remember preparing for the birth of my child: taking the prenatal vitamins, reading “What to Expect when you are Expecting,” painting the nursery, playing the Baby Einstein CDs, and grabbing anything else I could get my hands on to ensure a healthy pregnancy and delivery. The story of Jesus’ birth was in such sharp contrast to the luxuries and advantages that I had, and it blew my mind that God would choose to be born in such dicey circumstances. Doesn’t the Son of God deserve the best nutrition, the best medical care, and the best education that could be obtained at the time? It seems like Jesus should have been born in the palace of a king with the best resources that humanity has to offer. That is what conventional wisdom dictates, and that is certainly what we would each seek for our own children.

Yet, the truth of the story of Jesus was that he was birthed and parented by poor refugees in Mary and Joseph, his story was witnessed and spread among migrant field workers in the shepherds, and he was honored and protected by Middle Eastern foreign mystics in the wise men. If God had such a dim view of humanity, why would God trust us enough to be born and raised in the most vulnerable and often, the most despised circumstances that the human condition could offer?

I think it says something about the incredible depth of God’s love for us and the broad potential that God sees in each one of us. To be sure, God has seen and knows the worst sides of us. But the God who created each one of us also knows

intimately the gifts that were planted in our mothers' wombs, gifts designed to bear God's divine light into the world. Mary is known in the Eastern Orthodox Church as "theotokos" or "God bearer." God saw in Mary her gifts and imperfections yet thought her worthy of bearing God into the world. While the institutional church has a history of venerating Mary and setting her apart from the rest of us, I suspect she was as ordinary as we are. To me, that suggests that the gift of "God bearing" isn't just reserved or intended for Mary alone.

Now, I confess that I have had a dimmer view of humanity as of late. The rise of the divisiveness and hate in recent years, the fights over walls and immigrants has been wearing my spirit down, and it has been a struggle to claim the hope of the gospel. I have been reading books, attending workshops, and listening to any resources I can to try to heal and shift the broken narrative in which we are living. But, like many people, I have also coped by watching an embarrassing number of cat videos and gorging on guilty pleasures like Netflix. Like the sweet excesses of the Christmas season, these coping skills often lead to sugar crashes with no nutritional or spiritual value.

In a desperate attempt to find some hope of the Incarnational kind, I actually googled "acts of kindness" the other day (yes, it has come to that) and was both shocked and heartened to see that there is still an abundance of goodness in the world. I was most interested in a story I read about a priest named Father Jim Sichko from Kentucky. Father Jim is one of 700 priests from around the world who were appointed directly by Pope Francis in celebration of a "Jubilee of Mercy" that began in December 2015 and has since been extended indefinitely. Father Jim has been traveling to all 50 states to perform acts of kindness. He's provided groceries for half a year to a man with HIV and paid for medical services for a struggling Muslim family. He's topped off gas tanks in Kentucky and bought lunches at fast food restaurants in Hollywood. At a Starbucks last Christmas, he tipped each of the baristas \$100 after learning that the backlash over their holiday cups had caused their tips to decrease. This Christmas, he surprised 100 second-graders at a low-income elementary school with new bicycles.

When asked, "Why are you doing this," he responded, "Why not? My approach is not so much speaking about the word of God, although I do a lot of that, but showing the presence of God through acts of kindness that shock the individual and cause them to stop for a little bit," he said. "Or maybe, which I hope, to again bring kindness to others." And that is what the Incarnation is about, my friends. We are all invited to participate in this "Jubilee of Mercy." It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for mercy comes from the same root word as "womb."

Mary's womb, and indeed, humanity's wombs were made to birth divine acts of kindness and mercy into the world.

Breaking through the glitz and clutter of the season emerges the true meaning of Christmas: Almighty God came into the world helpless and completely dependent on human beings who were willing to open their hearts, overcome their fears, and birth the divine into the world. It is an obedient partnership that we have with God – to self-sacrifice, to nurture, to love, to serve. And that is why we depart from the chaos and noise of the world to gather tonight to hear the story one more time. One of the miracles of the birth story of Jesus was that God saw the potential in humanity to birth the divine, to nurture the divine, to see it through in the fullness of time. Theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman wrote this about Christmas: “Where refugees seek deliverance that never comes and the heart consumes itself as if it would live, where children age before their time and life wears down the edges of the mind, where the old man sits with mind grown cold, while bones and sinew, blood and cell, go slowly down to death, where fear companions each day's life, and perfect love seems long delayed. Christmas is waiting to be born: in you, in me, in all mankind.”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, just as God trusted Mary, Joseph, the Inn Keeper, the shepherds and the wise men, so God loves us and trusts us enough to birth Christ's love into the world, a world that so desperately needs it. Let us remember as the fighting in our nation and our world rages on, God invites us to bear acts of welcome and mercy into the world. In another Christmas poem, Howard Thurman writes: “When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart.” May it be so, Amen.