

Homily
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Christmas Eve
Saturday, December 24, 2022
7pm

In her poem, "Every Year," the Rev. Sarah Speed writes,

*My heart and I have an agreement.
Every year we show up here—
here in the sanctuary,
here with the candles and the tall ceilings,
here with the creaky church pews
and the songs of silent nights.*

*My heart and I have an agreement.
Every year we show up here—
at the end of the year,
after another 12 months
of humanity, of me
trying to
keep it all together,
trying to
keep my head above water,
trying to
keep up appearances.*

*Every year we show up here.
We drop it all.
We leave it at the door.
We come into this space
and I could swear it feels different.*

*Maybe it's God.
Maybe it's hope.
Maybe it's love.
But whatever it is,*

*I need it
every year,
so we show up here.
Tell us again the story of tonight.*

My heart needs it.¹

[pause]

I am thirty-two years old. I grew going to church, so that means this is my thirty-third Christmas Eve service. Many of you gathered here have me beat. Or perhaps this is your first Christmas Eve at church in a long while, or your first Christmas Eve at church ever. Here's what I know from thirty-three Christmas Eves: The music will change year-to-year. The people who gather changes some, too. The tradition of one church can vary from another.

But every year we tell the same story. The plot never changes; there are no surprise twists. I remember one memorable Christmas Eve when we were snowed in and the church had to cancel worship. What did my family do? We pulled out a Bible and read the Christmas story.

Why do we tell this story year after year? What is it about this story that keeps drawing us in?

It's comforting. It's familiar. It's tradition. Those are certainly some of the reasons. But underneath those reasons is the conviction that this story still has meaning for us. This story still has the power to inspire, to challenge, to make us pause in awe and wonder. Two thousand years after it was first told, this story still has Good News to share.

And the Good News is this: God shows up. And not just for the powerful or the perfectly religious. God delights in showing up in the least expected places to the least expected people. To a teenage mother and her scared fiancée. In a barn full of animals. To shepherds just going about their daily jobs, jobs that no one else wants.

¹ Prayer by Rev. Sarah Speed. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

If we think that God only shows up when we have achieved whatever level of holiness we think our lives ought to reflect, then we miss the point of this story. Holiness does not mean perfection. Holiness is not just for once a year or for when we have our lives together. Holiness is the exact opposite. Holiness is God blessing the ordinary. And what could be more ordinary or more holy than a baby being born?

The birth of Jesus is a moment of excruciating pain. Mary bleeds and sweats and screams just like any other woman giving birth. It makes no difference that she is birthing the Son of God; God hallows even this. God enters the world the same way we all enter the world: naked, squalling, and covered in afterbirth.

Each year we tell this story because it is alive with the same joy, pain, and complexities of being human that we all experience. This story reminds us that God shows up not despite our humanity, but in and through our humanity: “In a child who cries, in hands that hold, in human flesh, in life and in death.”²

New Testament professor Esau McCaulley wrote this about the Christmas story: “Christmas, for the Christian, has never promised to soothe every pain or cure every ill...Instead, Christmas is the grand miracle that makes space for all the smaller miracles. It gives us enough hope to walk a little farther in the dark toward the glimmer of something that seems too distant to reach.”³

So, no matter the particularities of your story – the parts you celebrate, the parts you grieve, the parts that are ordinary and boring, or the parts you regret and wish never happened – your story is holy. Your story is holy because God is in the midst of it. The Christmas story invites us to live our lives as if God lives among us, because God *does* live among us. Not just in a frozen moment in time two-thousand years ago, but right here, right now. We tell this story year after year to remind ourselves that the God of yesterday is also the God of today. The God of big miracles is also the God of ordinary miracles. This is a story we need to hear again and again. To tell the story is to affirm our beloved worth in God’s eyes. And that is Good News worth passing on.

² Artist statement. “How God Shows Up” by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

³ “Christmas is Weird,” by Esau McCaulley. *The New York Times*. December 23, 2021. [nytimes.com/2021/12/23/opinion/christmas-is-weird.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/23/opinion/christmas-is-weird.html)

Let us celebrate the Good News by reciting together our Affirmation of Faith:

We believe
that for generations
people have gathered together
on this holy night,
because there is something about this story
that speaks to the deepest parts of us.

We believe in bundling up this hope,
this good news, and passing it on—
to our children, to our neighbors,
to the world around us.

I believe my voice can make a difference,
just like I believe this story can make a difference,
so I will not stay quiet.

I will tell this story—of a love that makes room for all.
I will sing this story—of a love that knows our name.
I will live this story—because love has come again.

I believe that words have power.
I will not stay quiet.
Amen