

Homily
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d’Alene
Christmas Eve
Sunday, December 24, 2023
10am & 7pm

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Theme: This night we are those who dream

[prayer]

One of my dearest friends gave birth to a baby girl earlier this month. We live in different states, so as the weeks passed, we sent text messages back and forth. She shared potential names, yard sale finds, and the occasional baby bump picture. I responded with words of encouragement and delight. Then the week of the due date arrived. Every time my phone pinged, I thought “This could be it!” Until one morning when I woke up and there was a picture of baby on my phone, pink-faced and a little squashed looking, peacefully snoozing in a hospital bassinet. She had embarked on her short journey into our world with minimal fanfare while the rest of us were sleeping. The normalcy of her arrival was a little bewildering, like “Oh, there you are. Of course. Right where you are supposed to be.”

With that feeling of normalcy also comes curiosity and anticipation for her future. I am not a mother, but I am honorary aunt to a growing extended family of my friends’ children. The oldest has started elementary school while the youngest is now a few weeks old. I save the pictures their parents send, and I marvel as I watch them grow into themselves. When I visit, they show me the things that interest them and tell me the things they are learning. And I wonder: Who will you become, little one?

Despite pageant portrayals to the contrary, the birth of Jesus was pretty normal – so normal that Luke affords it a meager two verses: “While they were there [or “While they had been settled there”] [in Bethlehem], the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom” (vv. 6-7 CEB). Pretty undramatic. There’s no mention of a mean innkeeper or headlong rush to the birth (both pageant fictions). Even the manger is

commonplace; a typical home in the ancient Near East had a single room on the lower level that the family shared with their animals, and the manger was where the animals ate. The guestroom would have been upstairs. If that room was already full, then the family room downstairs was where Mary and Joseph could find a little privacy for the birth. So, Jesus was born in a common room and laid in a common manger. A little like tucking a baby into a dresser drawer when there is no cradle at hand.

In contrast to his sparse description of the birth, Luke spends thirteen verses describing the response: the angels' declaration of peace and goodwill, the shepherds' fearful excitement, the amazed reaction of everyone who heard the news. But it is Mary's response that really stands out. The Christmas story concludes with this mysterious sentence: "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (v. 19 NRSVUE).

I imagine Mary pondered the same thing I ponder when I look at my friends' children: Who will you become, little one? Mary knew something of what Jesus would become, indeed what he already was: Wonderful Counselor, Eternal Father, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Christ the Lord. These are certainly some of the words she treasured. The hymnwriter proclaims, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Those seem like some awfully big expectations to put on one tiny baby. And yet, this is exactly what God does. God empties himself of glory and pours himself into the vulnerable body of a newborn. To save us, God becomes one of us. The commonplace miracle of birth begets our deliverance.

American poet Carl Sandburg wrote, "A baby is God's opinion that life should go on...Never will a time come when the most marvelous invention is as marvelous as a newborn baby... Before man learned how to make an alphabet, how to make a wheel, how to make a fire, he knew how to make a baby — with the great help of woman, and his God and Maker."¹

The birth of Jesus was God's great 'yes' to humanity. Despite the smudges of sin that obscure the image of God inside us, despite the evil we continue to visit upon each other, despite the ongoing proliferation of our need and weaknesses – all the reasons God could and should say 'no' – God chose instead a resounding 'yes.' From the moment of our fall in the Garden, when we hid from Him in shame, God

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/265334-a-baby-is-god-s-opinion-that-life-should-go-on>

has dreamt of our reconciliation. And in Jesus, God made a way for this dream to come true. The angels proclaim that God's peace rests on those whom He favors. If you ever wonder whether that includes you, look no further than the manger. That is how far God went to demonstrate His love for you and all the world...until He went even further, all the way to the grave.

The celebration of Christmas is an active remembering of what God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ. The chasm between earth and heaven is bridged and God's reign of peace and justice is begun. But it's not complete. Every time we read the news, we are reminded that there is still work to be done. When I start to feel despair over the state of our world, the birth of my friends' baby, of any baby, reminds me that God is still saying 'yes.' What God did on that holy night two thousand years ago, God is still doing today – in you, in me, in our broken world. God is still sowing His dream of a creation completely reconciled to Himself and remade in the image of His kingdom. If God has not given up hope, why should we?

And so, as we once again kneel at the manger, what will our witness be? Will we share God's dream? Will our words and actions proclaim the hope of this new creation? Will we commit ourselves to praying and working for a world where our children know just a little more of His kingdom come?

Those are my ponderings, to which I say *amen*.

[pause]

If you are ready to say 'yes' to God's dream, then I invite you to stand and proclaim together our Christmas affirmation of faith:

L: We believe in hope.

P: We believe that to hope is to dream with our eyes wide open.

L: We believe in peace.

P: We believe that peace is not found by accident. Prepare the way.

L: We believe in joy.

P: We believe that joy is angel choruses and gifts from the Magi,

**As well as soul food, big tables,
Open doors, candlelight, fireside,
Singing in the shower, and the body of Christ gathered as one.**

L: We believe in love.

**P: We believe that God loves us so much that God could not stay away.
So God showed up as a child.
We believe that God's love is real, and we know that it changes us.**

L: Therefore, we believe in the power of dreams,

**P: And we believe that nightmares, which are all too real here and now,
Will have no place in God's promised day.**

L: Until then, we believe in passing the light,

In showing up, in doing the work,

In listening for angel choruses, and in learning from the youngest among us.

P: We believe.

Help our unbelief.

Amen.²

² "Affirmation of Faith" by Rev. Sarah Are Speed. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.