

Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“In the beginning
was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word
was God.”

Earlier this evening
we celebrated the birth of our savior
with the traditional story
acted out
by parish kids and friends.
As always, it was somewhat chaotic,
angels almost missing their cue
and shepherds
getting lost on the way to the manger.
And in the midst of it all
a wriggling, curious, not-quite-one-year-old
baby Jesus
kept more or less in check
by her proud father
and a visibly pregnant Mary.

It's not quite like
the Christmas cards,
those serene scenes
bathed in moonlight glow.
But I suspect
that it is probably more like
the reality.
The shepherds, more used to gathering up stray sheep
on the hillside
less certain
in the narrow streets
of a small town,
Mary exhausted from labor

and Joseph delighted and worried in equal measure,
especially when the shepherds arrived
direct from their fields,
training wisps of wool
and that distinctive farmyard smell.

And by the time the wise men arrived,
their stop at Herod's palace
providing opportunity to wash the dust from their long journey
and put on the robes
that befit visiting a king,
but suppressing the fear
that their stop there
might also have put
this small child in danger,
by the time they arrived,
following the vague promise
of a star,
the baby was no longer newborn;
probably testing his feet
and babbling sounds
that his parents were sure were Mama and Dada,
and the house was full of the chaos
that surrounds the home
of every small child,
and the last things they expected - or needed -
were gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We know the story,
told so beautifully
in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.
But then we get to the gospel according to St John, the gospel
that we read this evening,
and John seems
to have missed the whole event.
He doesn't know anything
about angels or shepherds, stars or magi.
He doesn't even appear to know
the name of Jesus' mother, let alone poor Joseph.

And yet
his are the words
that touch us so profoundly
as we wait in the darkness
for the coming of the Messiah.

Why?
Because they take us
from the details of that well-known story
to the very heart
of what it was all about,
and they connect that heart
with our hearts.

We live in a world
where death
looms large.
Whether it's the death of failed relationships
or the death of loved ones
or the death of our own hope,
we long for life.

We live in a world
where darkness
is ever threatening.
Whether it's the darkness of war
or the darkness of loss
or the darkness of our own minds,
we long for light.

We long for life.
We long for light.
We long
for God.

And God comes, God comes
in this little baby,
God comes.

The one in whom

all things
 came to be,
 everything
 was created,
 back before
 the beginning of time
 when God spoke
 and in this Word
 all creation
 came into being.
 This Word
 that holds within himself
 the very breath
 of life.
 This Word
 whose life is the light,
 a light that nothing
 can dim
 that brings light
 to us all.
 This Word,
 this God,
 this baby.

In his poem, "Annunciation," the seventeenth century
 poet and priest John Donne spoke to Mary:
 "Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
 Wast in His mind, who is thy Son and Brother;
 Whom thou conceivst, conceived; yea thou art now
 Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;
 Thou hast light in dark, and shutst in little room,
 Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb."

Immensity cloistered.
 The fullness of God
 was pleased to dwell
 in the constricted container
 of a baby.

Or in the words of the song

most recently made popular
by the group Pentatonix,
“Mary did you know”

Did you know
that your Baby Boy
has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little Baby
you kissed the face of God?

We long for God.
And God comes,
God comes.

God comes to us
as a baby,
a baby in whom
says the letter to the Colossians,
in whom the fullness of God
was pleased to dwell.
The fullness of God dwelling in this child
come to dwell among us,
full
of grace
and truth.

A child
who would grow into a man,
would preach and teach and heal
and rescue a celebrating by turning water into wine
and feed thousands
with five loaves of bread
and two fish.
And would go to his death
betrayed,
and abandoned by all
even, it felt
by his God.

Yet in a final act of trust

he would commend himself
into the hands of his Father, his God,
and life overcame death
and light, darkness,
and three days later
he would rise again
and began
a new work of creation
life overwhelming death,
light
subsuming darkness,
the promise
fulfilled.

The promise
of this child.
Who came among us
full
of grace
and truth.

And brought us with him
with that baby in the manger
with that man on the cross
with that savior
risen and glorious,
with him
we are brought
into the family of God.

And in his birth
is our birth.
As he is born
so are we,
born not of flesh
or human desire
but of God,
God's very children,
blessed
with the wondrous grace

of God
and loved,
loved beyond all measure.

As I wrote this sermon earlier today
the church bells began to ring
not with a traditional carol
but with that beautiful hymn:
Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down.

Echoing that lovely carol that we will sing on Sunday
Love came down at Christmas,
love all lovely, love divine;
love was born at Christmas:
star and angels gave the sign.

This is the baby in the manger,
this is immensity cloistered,
this is the face of God.
Love all lovely, love divine.
Love
made flesh,
living not just in a stable
but among us
and within up.

And so we turn
to him in love,
worshipping him
this Christmas Eve,
this Word made flesh,
our life,
our light,
our God.