

Christmas Eve, Year B, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

This year
has been a year of babies here at St James,
and especially the last few months.
First was baby James, son of Kathleen and James,
and then Madison, daughter of
Then Jack, son of Jack and Sarah,
who played the holy family in our pageant tonight.
And we're still waiting on Carmine and Jennifer's baby, due next week.

Each and every one of those babies
are beautiful
and precious,
and absolutely incredible,
this gift of new life.

And as we look into their perfect and entirely unique faces,
it's hard to imagine why
any one baby
could be more special
than any other,
or to put it another way,
why this baby
is any less important
than any other.

So why do we make such a fuss
about one baby
born over two thousand years ago
in a small village
in the Holy Land.
We all know the story.
Mary and Joseph,
traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered,
a seventy mile journey
and Mary pregnant, close to term.
The worst time for traveling,
but they arrived safely
and eventually found shelter
in a stable

turned emergency accommodation for the people
flooding in for the census.
And there she gave birth
to a tiny baby,
and named him Jesus.

But all those things
could have been said
about any number of babies born that night
when everyone was on the move with the census,
stables pressed into service as guesthouses
and the stress of it all
inducing labor
whether the babies were full term or not.
They were all precious
and beautiful
and incredible
gifts of life.

So why is this one so important
that we still celebrate his birth
two thousand years later?

Yes, an angel announced his birth - twice - once to each parent -
and yes he was visited by shepherds and wise men,
but still the question remains,
why this one?

And it's here
that we have to turn away
from the traditional Christmas story
as told by Matthew and Luke
to the version told by John.

Because Matthew and Luke
talk about what happened;
John talks about why.

And where he begins
is right at the beginning
back before the creation of all things.
Remember how the bible begins, in the book of Genesis?
"In the beginning

when God created
the heavens
and the earth, the earth was a formless void
and darkness covered
the face of the deep,
while a wind, a breath, from God
swept over the face of the waters.
Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

That's where John begins,
back in the beginning,
when there was nothing
except
God,
God who creates,
God
whose breath sweeps across the water,
God who speaks.

In the beginning
was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
The voice of God
bringing life into being,
the voice of God
bringing light into the world,
a swirling with darkness
and incoherent chaos.

The Word was there
in the beginning.
He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Fast forward,
and there is John,
John the baptist,
not John the gospeller
who wrote this book of the bible,
John the Baptist,
a crazy man

sleeping rough in the desert,
preaching to people
that they need to repent,
to renounce the wrong things they have done,
to turn back to God,
and to be baptized.
That's how we remember him.

But John the gospeller
remembers him differently.
Not just the crazy man in the desert
but the one who pointed back to creation
and forward to the one who would come,
the light of the world
who was coming.
John the Baptist, who recognized one man among many
who came to be baptized
as the one he had been waiting for,
the light of the world,
the Word
made flesh,
God
dwelling among us.

And now we go back to the story
of the baby,
and that's what is different.
Not just
that he was born in a stable,
not just that shepherds and wise men and angels heralded his coming.
This baby, this baby
is the Word made flesh,
God
come among us.

It sounds impossible.
But this,
this is what we celebrate
at Christmas,
not just the birth of a baby,
but the birth of this baby,
God with us.

God,
the creator of the world
who should have remained remote from us, distant, aloof,
as befits one of great power and glory,
instead, God took on human flesh
and became part of the world that he created.

But not just that.

Not just that.

Because yes, God became part of the world in Christ

But he was not content
to leave the world as it was,
broken and messy and fallible.

God came among us in Christ
to redeem this world of ours,
to free it from evil,
to make it whole once more,
and us with it.

Isn't that why we're here, remembering this particular birth?

Because we long for God to come among us.

We long for redemption.

We long for healing.

We long
for God.

And here we meet him,
lying there that first night of his birth,
feeling the warmth of his mother,
the flickering of the small fire,
the smell of the hay
and the sound of animals,
totally dependent on those around him,
who is also
the Word
the life
the light.

And that's the paradox isn't it?

God of power and glory
to whom the angels sing,
born a baby,
born for us,
so that we might become

children of God.

God entered our life
in all its messiness and complication,
God entered our life
with the promise of redemption,
God entered our life
so that we could enter God's life.

And this, the baby in the manger,
this is just the beginning.

Of a life lived in grace and truth,
of a life that invites us
to meet God,
here, now
in bread and wine,
and then, at the fullness of time, in glory,
when we will be raised alongside our Savior.

God from God, Light from Light eternal,

O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.