

Sunday, December 31, 2017
First Sunday after Christmas Day (Year B)
The Rev. Dr. Barbara Stewart

It's the seventh day of Christmas today. I love the fact that the church gives us twelve days to celebrate and to reflect; it is too much to even begin to grasp the whole of idea of Christmas on just one day. On this seven swans a-swimming day, the big celebration is over: the preparations are finished; what is done is done. The things we didn't quite get done – well, next year.

But, more importantly, we have gathered with the crowds at Bethlehem, gathered around a manger, in the cold of night, and there we have seen the Word made flesh, God born here and now. We have listened to the angels with their words of joy and hope, and we have sung these words. For a time, we have laid aside our weights and cares, and looked to a world of peace and good will among all.

Who is this one we have come to see? The One who was in the beginning, says the writer of the Gospel of John, before time, with God. The One who is God's own self, God's own life, the light that overcomes darkness and enables us to become God's own children. Majestic and awe-inspiring, deep beyond anything we could imagine. This is God.

And at the same time, here he is, a tiny baby, unable to turn over on his back without assistance, utterly dependent on the care of his mother. Hold him for a moment in your arms, this little one; look at his tiny fingernails, count his toes, scrape the fleck of cow manure off his back. Feel his warmth, listen to his little breaths. This is God, this is what God has decided to look like, and all for the love of you and of me.

Whatever are we to make of this?

A baby, in the best case, comes from love. God has loved humankind from the moment God thought us up, but that relationship has not always gone smoothly. In the Garden, in paradise, we had everything, and we wanted more. So we were banished, swept out of the garden by two angels with flaming swords. And then God made a covenant with us; I will be your God, and you will be my people. You be faithful to me, and I will be faithful to you. But we were not faithful; we turned away.

And God tried again: you need some guidelines to live by. Okay, here are 10, written on stone so we would not forget. Keep them, and you will do well. But we didn't. So we were given two commandments: Love me and love your neighbor; simple enough, right? I'll even write them on your hearts, never mind the stones. But even that we could not manage. The history of our love affair with God is the repeated story of God's faithfulness and our frailty. Every time the distance between us threatened to put an end to the relationship, it was God who stepped across the breach, taking on more and more of the burden, until with the birth of a baby, God accepted it all.

Okay, we're going to try a new covenant. I will bridge the gap between you and me, says God, and this is how: with a love so great I will come to you where you are, to be flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. I will do it all, and your part is to believe, believe that I love you enough to become one of you, and that I will love you to death.

Perhaps all this would make more sense if, in coming among us, it was in great power and pomp, some imperial monarch, rich and powerful. But, no; God was willing to become a helpless infant if that would help us love God even with a little bit of the love God bears us.

This is the mystery we celebrate, the incarnation, how far God was willing to go to be held in our arms.

And the implication of that incarnation is that in becoming flesh, God forever blurred the distinction between the holy and the ordinary. God could have chosen to come among us as a celestial being or a mighty emperor, in some form clearly superior, clearly far beyond our reach. It would make more sense, in a way: the Creator of all that is would be more recognizable, and we would have kept our distance from him. But God chose instead to come as a child, a poor child at that; a real baby, who fussed and kept his parents up all night. God showed us that flesh and blood, dirt and sky, life and death were good enough for him. More than that, God hallowed them, made them holy, by taking part in them. Now nothing can be unknown to God; God has been there, done that. Who we are, our joys and our challenges, our good days and our bad, our common times and the extraordinary moments are the stuff that God knows.

And all that means we matter, and what we do and how we live matters. It's not like there are two separate worlds, what we do here on Sundays, in church – and then we close that all off as we leave and the rest of our time is something else. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us – literally, pitched his tent among us. So all of our lives belong to God. Perhaps a good new year's exercise: think about – and write it down if that helps – how you spend your time, your energy, your money, your talents. Yes, we need our community of faith, we need to be able to come, week by week, to be fed and strengthened and nourished and challenged. So church is an important part of those equations.

But, for most people, church is not the end of the story. You go back home, you go to school, you go to work; how does God figure in all of that? How you treat your classmates, your teachers, your fellow workers, matters. How you work and study and play matters. How you relate to those in your family matters. God is not just a Sunday thing; God chose to come into the world, your world and my world; God knows, and God cares.

The writer of the Gospel of John describes the Word as life and light: "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."

Something to hold onto on those days, in those situations, where all seems dark. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Which means nothing we can do, nothing that can happen to us, will extinguish the light.

And it also means that we are called to be light in this world, to reflect the light that shines in our lives, to care for those around us. You do this as a community in Feed My Lambs and in the Food Bank. Well done! As part of that inventory of time, talent, energy, money – how can you help those around you? There are many simple ways: when I was at the grocery store yesterday, the person in front of me had given the cashier a hard time. Just to listen to her, to assure her that she was okay – a little bit of light. Are there ways you can help at school? Remember the food bank when you do your grocery shopping? Look around; see where God needs your help to care for the world God loves.

On this seventh day of Christmas, may we rejoice that God comes among us, that every ordinary thing – and that includes us! – can be filled with God’s glory.

Ann Weems has written a book called *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. Here is one of her poems:

And in these days a decree goes out to all the world,
for these are taxing times.
We are all called again to go to Bethlehem,
no matter the state of our health or our world.
We come, obedient and faithful,
for we have heard the message,
we have dreamed the dream
that God will come to dwell among us.
We come, expectant with joy,
pregnant with anticipation,
for God has done great things for us.
We come searching for a sign;
bearing our gifts we come.

We come, called from the silent hillsides of our hearts,
startled and frightened by the magnitude of light,
we huddle together toward Bethlehem.
We come, one by one,
and yet, as one,
dancing into the Promise.