

“Christmas Eve Visions”

December 24, 2022; 7:30 pm & 10:00 pm

Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

Let us pray—

Holy One, giver of all light, lift up our hearts and minds to Christ, the morning star that never fades. By the light of your Holy Spirit reveal to us your saving Word and lead us to offer our lives to you in service and in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tonight, I want to tell you a story:

On a Christmas Eve in the 12th century, a Benedictine nun named Elisabeth kept vigil in the church with her community. During the celebration of the Eucharist, ***she saw a woman sitting in the center of a bright, shining sun.*** The woman's hair fell over her shoulders, and the light from the sun around her filled the monastery where Elisabeth was praying and then gradually spread out to illuminate the entire world.

As Elisabeth gazed at the woman, a dark cloud moved in to obscure the rays of the sun, and the woman began weeping. Elisabeth's vision lasted all through the night of Christmas Eve, with the cloud moving in and out, the woman shining and weeping, the earth lightening and darkening.

On Christmas Day an angel appeared to Elisabeth, and she asked him who the woman was. ***She is the sacred humanity of Jesus***, the angel explained, ***and the sun is the divinity that holds Christ's humanity and illuminates it.***

Stephanie Paulsell of Harvard Divinity School said: *“It's hard to imagine a better time to have a vision of the humanity of Jesus in all its beauty and compassion than Christmas Eve, one of the most visual liturgical celebrations of the year.”*

Elisabeth saw her visions in contemplative trances, but any Christmas Eve service can fill our eyes with the humanity of Jesus: *children* wearing their

holiday best; *families, friends, and strangers* wedged together into pews; the illumination of a face when one person turns to light the candle of another. *Elisabeth saw humanity lit by divinity on Christmas Eve, and so do we.*

Elisabeth's vision, however, is not just a vision of light, but also of ***darkness and despair***. Christ's humanity shines in glory in Elisabeth's vision but also weeps and grieves. Elisabeth's vision captures the joyful mystery of the incarnation, but it also captures the sorrows carried in the Christmas story: the weary couple needing shelter; the mothers left inconsolable when Herod murders their children; the journey to his own death this newborn child seems already to have begun. As Elisabeth understood, *our sorrows and the world's sorrows are part of Christmas Eve too.*

The threads of sadness that run through the Christmas story extend into life in our present time. Weary travelers are still refused shelter, the innocent are still slaughtered, Rachel still mourns her children. Our culture's frenetic approach to Christmas muffles those realities, distracts from them, and aims to keep us cheerful. But in the dark silence of Christmas Eve we hold and remember those realities. As we keep vigil with Elisabeth, we know that a little baby has been born into a broken world, and we lift our candles together to bear witness to a light we hope the darkness cannot overcome.

This means that *the mystery of the incarnation* blesses both *the sacredness of our embodied life* and, in Elisabeth's vision, *the vulnerability of God's life*. When the cloud obscures the light of divinity, the woman who is Christ's humanity begins to weep. Elisabeth describes her weeping as copious and profuse, reflecting *a grief* that is wholly inhabited, wholly felt. When the light of divinity is clouded over, it is the tears of Christ's compassionate humanity that shine instead.

Elisabeth's vision was apparently troubling to some. Before her vision was recorded, someone directed her to ask her heavenly messengers why Christ's humanity did not appear *in a masculine form*. When John the Evangelist appeared to her a few days after Christmas, Elisabeth dutifully asked and received an answer: *Jesus' humanity appeared to you in feminine form, John told her, so that she could also represent Jesus' mother.*

Elisabeth took John's "*also*" very seriously. But rather than replacing the original interpretation with the new one, *she kept both in her book of visions, letting them both be true*. In her vision, Christ's humanity shines forth as a woman and as a mother and knits him ever more deeply into the fabric of human life. By adding an interpretation without subtracting one, *Elisabeth invites us to imagine the multiple forms Christ's humanity takes, the many faces out of which we see it shine*.

Every Christmas Eve, of course, is an opportunity to see anew the humanity of Jesus: the babe in the manger, the mother exhausted from labor, the father trying to figure out what to do next. The children making their way to the border. The young man lying dead for hours in the street. The displaced people of Ukraine, the women of Iran. The person next to us in the pew who turns to light our candle with hers. *Christ's humanity is around us and within us, on this night and every night, waiting to be recognized*.

And so, (later) when we lift our candles during "*Silent Night*," we honor the light that shines in the darkness, a light that unflinchingly shows us the world as it is and offers us a vision of what the world might become. In the space in between, it's *our work to look for the humanity of Christ in the humanity of each other*, and to protect, nurture, and cherish it in all the forms it takes.

Let us pray—

God of light, whose wisdom shines like stars in the midnight sky, make the mystery of incarnation clearer to us so that our eyes will see you in others and our lives will be radiant before you. We pray expectantly. Amen.

