**“All the People”** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Christmas Eve The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Luke 2:1-20 Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 23, 2024

Eight hundred years ago, in the Italian hill town of Greccio, St. Francis of Assisi was inspired to celebrate a remembrance of the birth of Christ *in a living tableau:* a hay-filled crib with a donkey and ox beside it. The event is considered the first living nativity, and as St. Bonaventure describes the scene in his biography of Francis, *“the saint stood before the crib and his heart overflowed with tender compassion; he was bathed in tears but overcome with joy.”* Elated from this experience of Christ come near, Francis preached to the crowds that gathered about the *“Babe of Bethlehem”* who was born a *“poor King.”*

You see, for Francis that crib was a place where *God’s humility* poured forth in *radical connection,* the Creator of all things coming to dwell among his creatures. To set a vision of the Christ Child among animals was not simply a nice medieval morality play, a faith-filled entertainment based on a historically dubious rendering of Christ’s birth. Rather, Francis’s imagination followed the implications of Christ’s birth to *include* the animals that, though not mentioned in the scriptural accounts, were inevitably there, perhaps too obvious to even mention. To make them visible was to broaden the view of Christ’s coming into the world, an Immanuel moment that extended *God’s being-with* beyond the bounds of the human—to all creatures and the earth itself.

Theologian, John Philip Newell, put it this way:

*'At the heart of the Christian tradition is the story of incarnation, of God born in the flesh. But what have we done with this radical story of the divine-human intermingling in the Christ Child? We have said it points only to one, Jesus, rather than to all. We have treated him as an exception to humanity and as an exception to the universe, rather than as a revelation of humanity and Earth, all flesh, all matter interpenetrated with spirit. The cherished song of Immanuel that has echoed down through the centuries within the walls of Christianity needs now to be sung clearly and emphatically as a song of the immanence of the divine in all things, pointing not simply to the divine with us in one person, one place, and one time but to the divine within us in every person, every place, and every time.'*

As we think of nativity scenes, though, we tend to romanticize the Holy Family, surrounded by animals and angels, in a comfortable stable. We might even think of shepherds as children dressed in bathrobes, as in our church pageants, but things probably weren’t quite that rosy.

Mary and Joseph probably had more in common with today’s *refugees,* forced by a foreign government to travel a hundred miles for a census. All while Mary was about to give birth.

When they arrived at Bethlehem, where the inns and guesthouses were full, they must have felt dejected and homeless. Nonetheless, the promise of Isaiah was true for them, as it is for others throughout time: *“The people who walked in darkness / have seen a great light; / those who lived in a land of deep darkness— / on them light has shined.”*

Not only did Israel’s God shine a great light of *hope* among refugees in strange lands, but the *shepherds* near Bethlehem were abruptly startled by an angel of the Lord—surrounded by glory—sending them into town to behold Israel’s Savior-Messiah.

As the Gospel writer, Luke, put it through the voices of angels/messengers:

*“Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”*

All. The. People.

You see, when the angels proclaimed their good news of great joy for all the people, *they meant it.* *All*means everyone who shows up in the sanctuary this Christmas, and even those who don’t. Luke’s Gospel is *universal* in its welcome.

Luke insists we pay attention to the *vulnerable and excluded*, making his case with the angels giving special audience to the *shepherds* — field hands who weren’t worthy of being counted in the census. Christ’s birth is the beginning of a new kingdom, a place of peace on earth in which *everyone* is a citizen, *everyone* is invited to the table; a sanctuary in which *everyone* has a seat.

We often use the phrase *“beloved community”* in reference to God’s vision for the church and a just society. *But what does that really mean?*

The idea of *“beloved community”* originated with Josiah Royce, the turn of the 20th century American philosopher. For Royce, the beloved community represented the greatest hope for humanity. The place where all God’s people live together, reconciled to one another in the embodiment of universal love.

 But it was Martin Luther King, Jr, whose references to beloved community in his sermons and speeches popularized the term. King dreamed of racial reconciliation in beloved community. *“I have a dream that one day little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”*

The challenge presented by the beloved community is its *inclusiveness.* Beloved community is not just for Christians, not just for the people we like. Often, people say they know *“beloved community”* in their church or friend group, but this is only true if that group includes *both friends and enemies.* Beloved community upends and disrupts our *tribalism*, our tendency to *“other-ize”,* our desire to *avoid* and *exclude.*

The truth is, we are far from beloved community. Today, our differences and divisions feel insurmountable. We are at war, nation against nation and neighbor against neighbor. We are exhausted, angry, increasingly isolated, and lonely. We don’t trust each other or any diverse community to be a space of love and welcome or safety.

*Yet* even in the face of today’s high conflict, the angels show up to share their *good news—for all the people.*

There is something about the birth of a baby, a tiny, fragile human the size of a small sack of potatoes, that speaks to our potential. *What will this baby become?* We ask in wonder. *What will they do?* *How will they live? Who will they love?* In this poignant moment, nothing is known, and everything is possible. This possibility is *the hope* for which we come and to which we cling at Christmas.

In fact, every Christmas takes us back *to the beginning,* to the birth narrative, to the place where all are included, and everything is possible*. What will be born from this moment in our human history? What will be born for me, for you, for the beloved community?* Only God knows. But this Christmas, we are all reminded that with the birth of this tiny, fleshy God-child, *everything is possible.*

And so, tonight, on Christmas Eve, Christians gather in churches to celebrate the birth of Jesus, whom we hail as the Messiah, Savior and Lord. We sing carols, read the gospel stories of his birth and reflect on the significance of his life.

Then, at the climax of the service, we darken our sanctuary, a visible reminder of the darkness in the world — *injustice, violence, tragedy, poverty, sin and more.* In this darkness, a single lit candle enters the room. *It represents Jesus.* We remember that he came to bring light to the world, and then called his followers to let his light shine *through them.*

From this one candle, each person in the room lights their candles, and soon the room is filled with light.

*The service ends with a call for each person to rededicate themselves to pushing back the darkness in the world.*

In nearly every religion, we find similar themes. *Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and others* draw upon these same metaphors of light and darkness. In them, light is associated with *love, compassion, goodness and mercy,* a relentless pursuit of *justice* and for those who are theists, with God who is the source of this light.

In the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, we’re all called to *“punch holes in the darkness.”* Every day, each of us plays a part in *increasing* or *decreasing* the light in this world.

In 2019, Pope Francis traveled to Greccio, that village where his namesake set up the first nativity scene. There the pope reflected on the enduring attraction of the Christmas crèche, born from St. Francis’s desire to bring the events of God’s coming so close that we could touch them. In the apostolic letter that was eventually released from Pope Francis’s talk, *Admirabile signum*, he writes:

*“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us”* (*Lk* 2:15). *So the shepherds tell one another after the proclamation of the angels. A beautiful lesson emerges from these simple words. Unlike so many other people, busy about many things, the shepherds become the first to see the most essential thing of all: the gift of salvation. It is the humble and the poor who greet the event of the Incarnation. The shepherds respond to God who comes to meet us in the Infant Jesus by setting out to meet him with love, gratitude and awe. Thanks to Jesus, this encounter between God and god’s children gives birth to our religion and accounts for its unique beauty, so wonderfully evident in the nativity scene.*

Friends, as we reflect upon the meaning of Christmas for us this year, we’re reminded that the God of *exiles, refugees, and migrants* still shines light amidst today’s present darkness.

Peace on earth is what the Christ child came to bring, *and God’s favor extends beyond human bounds and measures*—(as St. Francis taught)—*to all creatures, to the earth, all that is.*

For exiles and displaced travelers, Jesus is present as a delivering *hope.* For common laborers and animal tenders in the field, glorious choruses of angels appear. And for the divisions and challenges of our day, Christ is a Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

It’s good news for *everyone*—no exceptions.

*Let us pray--*