

Message: Christmas Eve 2023

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore/Banff – Rev Greg Wooley

We gather on this wonderful night to hear once more the familiar story of the Nativity, which speaks of unexpected people being given responsibility far beyond what they could ever imagine:

- The shepherds, poster boys for the underclass, entrusted with protecting someone else's sheep but not generally regarded as trustworthy, are chosen as the first heralds of the Messiah's birth.
- The Magi, respected in their own land as learned are outsiders in this story, the first witnesses to the Messiah's birth to come from another land and culture.
- Joseph, a tradesman, and Mary, about whom we know little other than she was betrothed and most likely an adolescent, are not obvious choices to raise the Christ child, and Nazareth was not a top-five town in ancient Judah.

Yes, we recognize that Matthew and Luke shaped the telling of Jesus' birth with purpose, each character playing a particular function. The gospel writers were much more concerned with the meaning conveyed in the telling, than the historical accuracy of it all. The message of God's redemptive love born into our human story through the person of Jesus, and the role played by all these people – Mary, Joseph, Magi and Shepherds – not only shines a spotlight on Jesus, but shows the light of God shining in all of their lives.

This year, though, I find myself curious about the next panel in this storyboard – what came next for all the characters in this dramatic story. The Bible tells us little:

- we surmise that the shepherds go back to their jobs, as they must;
- the Magi go back home, though it is significant that they did were suspicious of Herod's motives, and bypassed him (Matthew 2:12) on the way home rather than revealing to him the location of the Christ child;
- and we are told that Mary, Joseph and Jesus, similar to the Magi, also escaped the area for a bit, heading into Egypt until such time as it was safe to make the move to Nazareth (Matthew 2: 13-23).

But that's all we hear about the shepherds and the Magi, and while both Mary and Joseph have significant traditions as Saints of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, we hear almost nothing further in the Bible about Joseph, and just a few episodes featuring Mary.

By contrast, the story of Jesus is just beginning in this scene of angels, shepherds, magi, and a little family gathered by a manger. The indwelling of God in this person, the words and deeds and, yes, crucifixion and resurrection all work together to speak of God's passionate engagement with the world – in particular, those who are denied full access to things that others take for granted, those who are denied basic human dignity, those who are labelled and regarded as "them" rather than "us". The next panel in the storyboard of Jesus' life opens us to all the rest of his life.

I realize that this goes quite a way beyond what we usually consider on Christmas Eve, but the entirety of who Jesus was, and what God expressed through all of his story, reach into this gathering tonight. And within that, I want to pick out one point from Jesus' ministry in which his birth story of God's indwelling love, melds with the words he spoke as an adult.

As recalled in the 22nd chapter of Matthew, Jesus was asked which Hebrew commandment was the greatest of all. In reply, Jesus tacked together two readings from Leviticus (19: 18,34) and Deuteronomy (6:5), saying "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. **And** the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22: 37-39 NRSV)

Love God, love others. Live with a consciousness that God infuses everything around and within you, and let that shape your intentions and actions – and Love your neighbour as yourself. And by “neighbour” Jesus means *everyone*; near or far, friend or foe.

Cynthia Bourgeault, an author, mystic and Episcopal Priest who once lived in Western Canada, once wrote that when we hear Jesus’ teaching to ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ we almost always hear it wrong; we hear it one step too small, as if Jesus was saying ‘Love your neighbor as *much as* you love yourself. But Cynthia writes, “If you listen closely to Jesus however, there is no ‘as much as’ in his admonition. It’s just ‘**Love your neighbor as yourself**’—as a continuation of your very own being. It’s a complete seeing, that your neighbor is you”. Just pause with that thought for a moment: that the loving concern Jesus calls us to have for others is to embrace them as an extension of yourself, each action undertaken for the good of all living beings for they are completely connected with you. That is a significant part the Christmas gift we receive in Jesus: an understanding that we are intimately connected to everyone, to the world, to God. Such broad-reaching love is beyond my comprehension, yet this is the gift of Christmas: a reminder of the overwhelming love that comes from God and is expressed in the fullness of Christ Jesus and in every interconnected life on this planet.

A lovely expression of “what comes next” in the Christmas story was written long ago by Howard Thurman, an African-American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader, and I end my message with his words:

“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost, to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart”.

Friends, may Christmas open each one of us, and all of us together, to this kind of expansive, wondrous love. Amen.

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