

"CLOSING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US: GOD IS WITH US"

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 Matthew 1:18-25

December 20, 2020 Advent Four

York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

These days we seem to be talking a lot more about the physical limitations of our human bodies. We talk about those who are immuno-compromised; those who must be intubated so they can get air into their lungs; those who are more susceptible to contracting Covid because of pre-existing conditions. We talk about positivity rates and sadly, death counts. While many people have recovered from the virus, the number of those who have not has climbed above 300,000.

If we ever needed a reminder of just how fragile our human bodies are, this is it. One cough, one sneeze, one touch, one inhalation of breath is all it takes to open the way for the virus to spread through our bodies. We are told not to spend more than 15 minutes with people outside of our own "bubbles"- and of course, to wear a mask at all times when not at home. I think we are probably much more aware of every cough or sneeze that comes from us or those around us.

It is hard to comprehend that something as tiny as the molecules of a virus took hold inside of one person on the other side of the world- and suddenly- almost everyone on earth feels the impact. We are fragile creatures, aren't we?

This renewed sense of our vulnerability as human beings makes our Christmas celebration all the more meaningful for me this year. God closed the distance between us by becoming flesh and blood and moving into our neighborhood. God closed the distance, first, through an angel delivering invitations to Mary and to Joseph. And then through the extraordinary new life that took hold and grew in Mary's womb. This is incarnation- God coming to be with us as one of us. It is the scandal of God choosing to wear our fragile, vulnerable flesh; to live among us and face the same joys, sorrows, griefs and pains that we all experience.

What does coming to be with us as a newborn infant tell us about our God? How does it set the stage for Jesus' life and ministry? How different would our faith be if we could have held the glory of heaven in our arms?

These are the questions the incarnation sets into motion. Richard Lischer writes, *"The Incarnation is when God rethought what it means to be God and decided to make a full and unreserved investment in the human world."* And so it was that Jesus was born into a complicated and dangerous world, into a persecuted faith and an oppressed family at odds with the domineering power of the Empire.

Through this birth God is renewing the covenant relationship with God's people in a radical new way. Suddenly faith in God wasn't just about following a set of rules and regulations. Faith in God is now about a relationship; it is about a person. And this person is not a great warrior or a wise king. This person is a baby.

Barbara Brown Taylor calls this *"the preposterous story about how God decided to abandon heaven for earth, trading power and might for diapers and a teething ring."*

And do you know what makes it really, really preposterous? God needed human partners to make it happen.

God needed Mary and God needed Joseph. Those two ordinary, fallible people allowed God to make a home in their arms and in their hearts. Ordinary humans allowed God to transform them into vessels of the divine. Isn't that extraordinary?

This transformation didn't happen without cost, without fear and anxiety. God was asking this young couple to do something that could have caused them to be outcasts in their families, their community and in their religion. Mary, unwed and pregnant. Joseph, taking on the responsibility of a child that did not carry his DNA. And so, we see at the very beginning of Matthew's Gospel that God's outrageous plan hangs on Joseph's reaction.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that *"According to Matthew, Joseph's belief is as crucial to the story as Mary's womb. God and all the angels are on her side, but it takes both parents to give birth to this remarkable child: Mary to give him life, and Joseph to give him a name."* And that is what Joseph does. He marries Mary and when the child is born, he does as the angel instructed, and names him Jesus.

Joseph was willing to believe the impossible, willing to claim the scandal, willing to take a chance on this insane invitation from God and claim it as his own. And he experienced "Emmanuel," "God with us," in a whole new way.

I have no doubt that over the years, working together in his carpentry shop, he bandaged up that divinely human flesh of his son more than once. God's entrance into our world became Joseph's pride and joy, his little boy. I don't doubt that he watched in wonder as God fully participated in the human condition in their small town of Nazareth.

Joseph shows us how to welcome incarnation- the radical intrusion of a flesh-and-blood God into the ordinariness of human life. Joseph shows us how to make a home for the full embodiment of God's grace, mercy, justice, compassion, and love.

As we think in a different way about what it means to be human in this year of Covid perhaps it will be easier for us to remember that Mary and Joseph aren't just stationary figures in our nativity scenes. They were flesh-and-blood people who lived in their human bodies much like we do. Maybe we can see that we, like them, are also called by God to accomplish God's purposes here on earth. Maybe this year we can relate even more to the surprise that turned their world upside down and changed the course of human history.

The time of Jesus' birth was a time of political upheaval, violence, division, hatred, and great poverty. It was a time of chronic uncertainty when the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. It was a time when the power of the Empire ruled the world and Caesar was "god." It was a time when the "Pax Romana," the peace of Rome, was upheld with the most advanced weapons systems available. It was not a hospitable time for God to be born.

And still God became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood. God came to be with us as one of us to show us just how much we are worth. For generations God had promised the people that God would be with them wherever they went. That promise takes on new meaning as God in Jesus actually leaves footprints on the earth and breathes our air.

David Lose reminds us that the incarnation shows us that God is with us, **really** with us. *"Not as we know we should be, or are trying to be, or have promised to be, or will be some day, but with us as we are now... today... in this moment."* It is significant to realize that God didn't wait for the perfect time to be born into history- because, really, when would that be? God entered into the human realm on an ordinary day and turned the world right side up.

The birth of Jesus was, to almost everyone else on earth at that time, unremarkable. He was born like everyone else was born. Although maybe he was among the few born in a stable. But that's the point. Although his conception was out of the ordinary, his birth was not. His family was just like any other family at that time. The good news for us is that God comes through ordinary, mixed-up people to transform the world. God comes through people just like us in times just like these.

God didn't just **visit** our world. God **lived in it**. That is the profound gift of incarnation. We are known by God because God was one of us. It is that simple and that complex.

Here is the ironic twist for us this year- as we near Christmas when we celebrate that God came to earth in a body like ours- we are told to stay away from other bodies. We can't hold a baby or hug our grandparents. We can't share cookies and sing carols. We can't dress our children in bathrobes and watch them meet baby Jesus in person at the Christmas Eve service.

For, probably the first time ever, we cannot physically enact the joy of God becoming flesh and blood. And that is painful for us. But it doesn't end our celebrations. Frederick Buechner reminds us: *"What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us."* Even now in our pandemic- laden world. And maybe even especially now.

Incarnation reminds us that we may encounter God anywhere. Jesus came into this world wearing skin like every other person ever born. That is the one thing we have in common with each other- we all wear skin. In our embodied life together- even at a distance, the words of scripture take on flesh. *"The central claim of the incarnation is that God trusted flesh and blood enough to bring divine love to earth."* (1)

The world wasn't made automatically better the day Jesus was born- the wars didn't suddenly stop, the Empire didn't begin to crumble, the rich didn't begin to joyfully share their abundance with the poor. But when God made a home in our arms, as theologian N.T. Wright suggests, *"A great door was swung open in the cosmos which can never again be shut."*

It is true that the world as we knew it has tilted. We have found new ways to safely connect with one another. We are creating new and meaningful ways to celebrate the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, *God-with-us*.

My prayer is that we would be among those, like Joseph, who believe that Jesus comes to us still today when human possibilities have run out, offering new and startling ways forward, in fulfillment of *God's* promises.

May we, like Joseph, hear the invitation of *God* and agree to participate in *God's* audacious plan to save the world.

And may we, like Joseph, recognize and love the glory of heaven when we hold it in our arms.

Amen.

END NOTES:

- 1- AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH, Barbara Brown Taylor. Harper One. 2009. P. 48