

Christmas Eve Reflection
24 December, 2015
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The Congregational Church of Hollis
A Service of Lessons and Carols

Each Sunday morning in Advent this past month, our congregation lit one candle, then another, and another, and another. We started with hope, then peace, next joy, and finally love: those attributes of God we long to experience and express in our world. Those features of the Holy that seem so often elusive—in our personal lives, our community, in a world wracked by anxiety, violence, self-interest and profound fear.

And each week, our prayer ended with the words, “We ask this in the name of the One who was born in Bethlehem.”

Bethlehem: that little town some five miles from Jerusalem, was heaving with people jostling for a place to bed down for the night, thanks to Caesar’s decree that every person was required to return to the home of their family’s lineage to be registered. It was of no consequence to Rome to or any of the lesser rulers that this expectation represented a hardship to the people; they could sort it out for themselves, or die trying. And the attitude of the leaders filtered down through the ranks of the people, each one assessing the worth of another based on whether or not they could be instrumental in furthering personal interests.

The purpose of the registration was to get a head count of the people, so that taxes could be levied. You can imagine how popular *that* was, what a great mood everyone was in, what the nature of the conversation was about: government, greed, corruption, liars, insiders, outsiders, and the like.

The whole project made everyone feel a bit edgy, depleted, less likely to cheerfully share their space—or *any* of their resources, for that matter. You’d think that, because Joseph and Mary were returning to the place of their lineage, there’d have been family members who would have made or found a bed for them—but, no. There was an overwhelming mentality of scarcity, suspicion, and an expectation that everyone could just fend for themselves: if they couldn’t manage that, that was pretty much their own problem—maybe they just needed to work a little harder.

It was a world in need of hope, peace, joy, and love no less than our world is today.

And it was into that environment—that crowded, anxious, frustrated, fearful, confused, and desperate atmosphere—that a young, unwed mother delivered the a newborn child who would embody those divine features: hope, peace, joy, love. The Word of God was made flesh, and came to live among us. And she wrapped in him swaddling clothes, and lay him in an animal’s feeding trough, because the rest of the world could not make room for him.

A mystery beyond comprehension, defying explanation? Absolutely. It hardly seems believable, especially today, in a time when educated people expect that everything real, everything true is capable of being explained, defined, described.

But, who can explain love? More than that, who can explain or adequately describe a love that moves the Creator of the universe, the life-force and fashioner of galaxies, to set aside all that power and descend to such mean estate, as to take up residence in the vulnerable flesh of an infant? Who can talk sensibly about how or why the One who designs worlds—who forms stars and moons, as well as blue whales, buzzards, and bumble bees, should have a mind and a heart that is drawn to human beings in so personal a way as to come to us, *as one of us*?

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, a poet and a mystic among other things, described the scandal and the mystery of the Gospel this way:

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room.

The Word became flesh, and as Mary laid that sacred bundle into a humble feeding trough, Luke tells us that the invitation to come see and embrace the divine presence was issued first to those widely considered to be society's low-lives: the shepherds. They were dirty, earthy, uncultured, and generally poor; hired hands who were considered beneath the social status of nearly everyone else. It's just typical of God's penchant for paradox that the world's ne'er-do-wells should be so honored. And that the child they'd been invited to embrace would one day come to be called The Good Shepherd.

So the shepherds went with curiosity and haste to discover: What child is this? And what is this child? This is the Word made flesh: "His name is Emmanuel—the God who is with us—who is made out of the same stuff we are and who is made out of the same stuff God is and who will not let either of us go."¹ This is the child who, more than just being born into a messy, anxious world two millennia ago, still comes to us. Here's what happened when that baby's cry first sounded in the crowded, anxious, fearful, suspicious town of Bethlehem that night: Love was born. The Word of God became flesh, and it started to grow in the midst of us.

Tonight, in this Meetinghouse in the center of Hollis, New Hampshire, we are in our Bethlehem. It may seem to all the world that this is not the time, nor is there room, for the expansive, universe-constructing Love of God to be born, much less to be sheltered in our mean space. And you and I, knowing as we do (though the rest of the world may not have the slightest clue) that our personal need for hope, peace, joy, and love is no less than was the lowly shepherds', we come bearing the hopes and fears of our collective years as we meet in this place tonight.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Past Perfection" in *Home by Another Way*.

We've come to this crowded inn, this meeting place for sojourners in search of Emmanuel. We've made our way to this Bethlehem place in the midst of Hollis, hoping to find and welcome the One whose presence and power can not only fashion galaxies and bumble bees, but can also fix the aches and pains, heal the splintered places we hide from the world but carry within.

On this night of nights, this Holy Night, we're invited to notice and acknowledge our longing to meet the One who will come to us not just in sublime places, but right in the midst of the mess and confusion. This is where God is born, just here, in the middle of our lives, willing to take up lodging in any mean cradle we will offer, willing to make the divine dwelling place in any pile of straw we manage to pat together.²

It is the most inexplicable of mysteries, the strangest of paradoxes that the Creator of all that is—with all the beauty, grace, and goodness that there is elsewhere in the universe—should come to the likes of us *as one of us*.

And maybe that's why, after praying for hope, peace, joy, and love, the culminating practice of singing carols and hearing ancient texts is what we love to do each Christmas Eve: because we cannot put into our own words, we cannot express the inexpressible mystery of God-made-flesh, we join heart and voice and spirit with everyone else who has nonetheless felt it in *their* bones as we have in our own. As another UCC pastor put it, "*We have felt God with us even when we could never explain how that could be. Christmas is our communal recognition, our shared celebration, that God is with us still, God is still speaking, God is still acting in our lives and in the life of the world that God loves so well. God is still with us, and we celebrate, and we sing our songs.*"³

Joy to the World! The Lord is come! Let us sing, and let us celebrate! Alleluia! Amen.

² Barbara Brown Taylor (paraphrased), in "Past Perfection", *ibid*.

³ Kathryn Matthews Huey, http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_december_24_and_25_2015