

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
The Rev. Christopher McLaren
Christmas Eve 2018
Text: Luke 2

Theme: What word do you hear from the manger this night? You Matter!

The shepherds were spending another night in the open air, in the bleak landscape of Palestine. The stars were glittering in the heavens above like they did every night of this demanding and tiring work of shepherding flocks. Driving their flocks to food and water doing some of the most menial work available. There is really no way to romanticize the arduous work of shepherds. They were among the lowest workers in the culture. And then, wonder struck shepherds, who moments before had been minding their business are invaded by God's glory - angels in the thousands, suddenly appearing and delivering music of indescribable beauty. Shepherds, simple ordinary folk, tremble, agog at the glory in the skies surrounding them. And there are these words spoken to them from the heavens:

"Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Praise and holy awe are their natural response. They hurry to find Mary and Joseph and the child lying in a manger – a feeding trough – unaware of how they themselves will be fed by this wondrous event. The story tells us of, one quiet peasant girl, who has journeyed a long way and just given birth in a stable. She sits in quiet wonder “treasuring all these words and pondering them in her tender questioning heart.”

Without question, Mary is tired – giving birth to a baby, even a heaven-sent one, takes extraordinary energy. Just how exhausted is Mary it's been a whirlwind – The Angel Gabriel's visitation, the happy reunion with Elizabeth babies jumping in the womb, the gestations period of 9 months, an arduous trip to Bethlehem and then finding the deluxe accommodations of the stable complete with beasts and critters. Mary, for all of her tiredness, offers something beautiful in the midst of all of this chaotic excitement, she remembers, she thinks on all that has happened, she ponders it all in her heart. What does it all mean?

Recently I was reading a book by Allen Jones, a priest, and spiritual director. He related a story from his life that I found incredibly poignant and that I believe makes an interesting connection to the story of Jesus' birth. As a young man, he found

himself a confused and depressed seminarian at the Mirfield College. The college was situated in the bleak but beautiful landscape of the Yorkshire moors in the north of England.

Of the experience he writes:

I have never experienced such isolation. In the winter the stars were still shining when we went to morning chapel and there seemed to be nothing between me and the glittering heavens. I experienced that wonder and terror of infinite space of which Pascal speaks. My me began to disintegrate, not in the benign disintegration of a person in the act of loving self-surrender. Mine was a kind of dissolution that placed everything on quicksand. I did not so much doubt God as I doubted myself. I even doubted my doubts. I felt rather like the hero of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, which is the story "of a man who was... driven and overwhelmed by the accumulation of natural coincidences, until he broke and began to accept the incredible-the possibility of God." Greene intended his hero to doubt his own atheism. This was precisely my own experience. I needed rescuing myself.

*Rescue came in two ways which have left an indelible impression on me as signs of the gracious availability of God even in the worst of times. The first was the sustaining power of a worshipping, compassionate, and believing community. For a while I was carried by the lively tradition of the Church, by the liturgical rhythm of the community, and the compassionate presence of my fellow Christians. For a few weeks then, I was sustained by the faith and faithfulness of the Christian community at a time when I felt that I had no faith at all or, rather, I felt that there was no "I" to have faith. Ever since then my favorite miracle story in the gospels is the one where the four friends of a man too sick to help himself opened up the roof of a house and lowered him on his bed and placed him at the feet of Jesus (Mark 2:1-5). "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic man, "My son your sins are forgiven. It was his friends' faith and not his own that saved him. I have always been impressed by the wonderful way in which we are to carry one another, from time to time, in the Christian journey. It was small acts of love, not intellectual arguments, which began the process of breaking up the cloud of doubt that paralyzed me. I came to believe that my brand of atheism was a "crutch for those who could not bear the reality of God."

The second part of the rescue operation was a summons from the dean of the seminary to for an afternoon walk with him across the moors. I had no choice; walks with the dean were part of a seminarian's lot. He was an extraordinary and powerful personality. I have since come to realize that he is an extremely complex man whose

own psychological and spiritual wounds helped to make him the man he was and is. At the time I had no real notion of his own hurts. I received nothing but receptivity and love and it was this that influenced me deeply. It was as if he could see into my deepest self. He was able to show me that God loved me all the way through. He was the bearer of the miracle that I mattered. This doctrine that I matter, that people matter, was and is the hardest thing for me to believe. My struggle with other aspects of Christian belief, are insignificant compared with the difficulty I have in accepting that I am loved. (Allen Jones, *Exploring Spiritual Direction: An Essay on Christian Friendship*.)

I think that every one of us wants to know that we matter. We want to know that we are loved. When I think about the beautiful story of Mary pondering the presence of the newborn child Jesus, I wonder what she was thinking, what meaning and message she was drinking into her wonderstruck life. The message of her aunt Elizabeth, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Mary, a poor peasant girl from Galilee, married amidst scandal, uneducated but is worthy of God's beloved child. Why is this happening to me? Does God really find me a worthy vessel to bear his own presence into the world?

In the manger at Bethlehem God spoke the most important message. We matter to God. We are worthy of his most cherished gift. We are loved by God and are capable of loving God in return. That is the message I believe Mary pondered in her heart, and what we are meant to ponder in our hearts. It is the word of a child whispered from the manger. And once this word is whispered in the soft flesh of a child, nothing can ever be the same again. And if we can dare to accept this whispered word into our hungry lives, then we can never be the same again.

Those of us who dare to call ourselves believers can never in a way be sure of God again. Once we have seen him in a stable, we can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths God will go or what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humanity. If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too. And this means that we are never safe, that there is no place where we can hide from God, no place where we are safe from his power to break in two and recreate the human heart because it is just where he seems most helpless that he is most strong, and just where we least expect him that he comes most fully. (Buechner)

Mary reminds us that whatever anyone else says about us, regardless of the things we may say about ourselves, or the dangerous things we tend to believe about our own worth, there is still this wild and surprising story of God, that God's own self became living breathing flesh and deigned to dwell among us. This is the story Christmas invites us to ponder in our hearts.

The wonderstruck shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem, were minding their own business, until the Glory of the Lord shone round about them and they heard the message of the angels that was almost too good to be true.

"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

The news is not just for special people, it is news for all people including you. You matter to God. Just as Alan Jones walking with the dean on the bleak moors around Mirfield came to realize, he mattered, he mattered to someone and most importantly he mattered to God. You are meant to be in relationship with the living God. You are worthy of this miraculous birth.

This is what the angels were singing about, this is what the shepherds rush to the manger to discover, this is what God wants you to hear on this Holy Night. The birth of Jesus in a stable at Bethlehem is the simple and terrifyingly beautiful message that you matter to God and that God will stop at nothing to help you to know that God loves you all the way through.

In the words of one of my favorite Christmas carols, "Love came down at Christmas" and that Love says that you matter no matter where you are in life: confident and successful, scared and discouraged, lonely and confused, depressed and unhappy, energetic and curious, or hurting and hoping. In the manger at Bethlehem, Jesus tells us one thing about God's crazy love, it is meant for you, and it can be taken to your loving heart just as a vulnerable and beautiful baby can be picked up and held close. You matter to God and God wants to matter to you. This is message of Christmas and what makes this night holy. So, don't be afraid to take Jesus in your arms this night, take him to your loving heart and let the message of the angels linger there. Tonight, we can rejoice with the angels and the shepherds on Bethlehem's plain, because in a manger at Bethlehem in a baby born to Mary, God has shown us that we are loved all the way through.

Glory to God in the highest.