

The Rev. Mary Cat Young

Sermon for Sunday, December 27, 2020, 1 Christmas

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalms 147 or 147:13-21

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

It's the third day of Christmas, and I wonder, how are you celebrating the in-breaking of God's love in the world today?

That's right, it's the third day of Christmas, though sometimes at this point in December it can feel like the thirtieth day, before ever reaching December 25th, with the months-long shopping season saturated with jingle bells, and twinkling lights, and the hunt for the perfect ornament, the perfect recipe, the perfect flourishes that make Christmas gatherings of family and friends hit just the right notes of holly and jolly.

But the preparations and the plans and the way of doing Christmas this year had to change, and because of it, perhaps we too are changed.

The invitation to a quiet and prayerful and penitent Advent, did not have to compete in the same way this year, with the thirty days of Christmas sales, concerts, shopping excursions, cookie exchanges, decorating extravaganzas that often saturate the days and weeks leading up to December 24th and 25th.

Some of these things were missed, of course, some of them longed for in a year with so many losses, so many missed occasions, so many already feeling isolated and alone - fewer opportunities to be engaged and active outside of the confines of one's set of walls, be they in a retirement community or a home office or kitchen-table centered classroom or black hole of endless zoom classes, online internships, family check-ins and social gatherings all through a screen -- I would think that most of us, of course, long for the freedom to choose where and how we might have participated in "keeping Christmas" this year. But found the demands on our time and energy occurring at a different pace.

As I spoke with a young adult recently, they shared with me their sense that despite having been raised in the church, with an understanding of the season of Advent, and the invitation to observe Christmas by focusing on the manger, the holy family, the arrival of new life, new hope, new promise in the birth of a child, our savior, their personal practices and family traditions of preparing for that holy day, (this holy season) didn't quite match up.

They felt the disconnect, the dysphoria of seeking to recognize and welcome God's love incarnate in the world, arriving in the humble means of a barn, witnessed by animals and random strangers knocking on the door - the christmas card version of the scene just wasn't working for them this time around. Even though that image had served them so well for years as a child and as a youth, this young adult was and is doing the work of trying to understand, what does this Christmas story mean for me?

The way of doing Christmas this year had to change, and because of it, perhaps we too are changed.

As we spoke and reflected on the new eyes with which they were seeing and exploring and trying to understand the meaning of Christmas, I gave thanks for the fact that the Christmas story, the birth narrative of Jesus, is told differently in each of the Gospels. Matthew and Luke, both setting up the manger scene for us, have the most similar attributes, though they are by no means a mirror image of one another.

And the Gospel according to Mark skips over Jesus' birth, childhood and young adulthood altogether, launching its invitation to hear the Good News of Jesus with the strange and wonderfulness of John the baptizer appearing in the wilderness and calling on all who would listen to an invitation to be baptized into the one who was soon to arrive on the scene.

(As an aside, if you haven't heard this invitation from me already, I encourage you to read the Gospel of Mark straight through - particularly helpful as we will be walking with and hearing from the Gospel of Mark on many Sundays in this liturgical year B - 16 short chapters - consider yourself assigned!).

But John, our poetic and spiritual writer, our Gospeller for today on the first Sunday in the twelve day season of Christmas, we are given these amazing words:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

In the beginning, long before St. Nicholas appeared on coke cans, and Western Europeans brought evergreens into their homes to brighten the long winter nights, and long before heavenly beings appeared in dreams and pronounced a holy birthright was being knit together in the wombs of women who trepidatiously said yes, long before human sin and imperfection kept us from seeing God and seeking God and recognizing God's love and receiving that love, long before all of human history and our making of religious practice and secular practice to remind us that we are called into relationship with God's love, alive and at work in the world... long

before all the trappings of our modern life, and all the human history that got us to this point --- in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God.

Yes, God has been present to us through the ages and in the times and places where we have set out to create an intentional “Christmas” for ourselves and for our loved ones. But God’s love was there before all of that too. God’s love was forming us, and preparing us to recognize love, alive in the world. Love in the form of creation. Love in the form of community. Love in the form of Jesus at his birth. Love in the form of Jesus on the cross. Love in the form of an empty tomb. Love in the form of Holy Eucharist.

*He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

For my young friend and for all of you, on this, the third day of Christmas, in a twelve day season, in the midst of a year that has challenged all of our assumptions about who we are and how we ought to be, and where God is and how Christian community gathers, I am amazed and thankful at the ways in which we are reminded that we do not make Christmas. That we may form traditions and songs and memories to carry with us in our pursuit of God, that from the beginning, God is there. That Christ was born for us, to give us a pathway to God in Jesus, and God is with us, we are together, even when this is how we must gather and do Christmas this year.

The way of doing Christmas this year had to change, and because of it, perhaps we too are changed.

It’s the third day of Christmas, how are you letting God’s love shine forth in your lives?