

Christmas Eve, 7:00 PM
December 24, 2023
Text: Luke 2:1-20

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Portland, Oregon

I imagine that since the beginning of our species, people have looked up at the stars in the night sky and felt a sense of wonder. Through the generations, people have witnessed sunrises and sunsets, and felt awe for the incredible beauty of this world. The orderly procession of the seasons, and the way the earth provides for our needs, evokes a sense of gratitude. But it's complicated, because with the beauty and joy also come sadness and loss. And in all of these experiences, I think we understand intuitively, not only that the gift of life is a profound treasure, but also an incredible mystery. We belong to something so much larger than just ourselves. To be alive on this earth is to be part of an immeasurable wonder. How can we even find words to describe such a mystery?

And on this night, we receive the amazing good news, that the great mystery that surrounds us, the source of life and meaning, has come to live among us, to make a connection with us, in the birth of Jesus. Each of the gospels try to express this in their own way: Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. Jesus is the Word made flesh, God's self-expression in a human life. Jesus is God's Son, the One who represents God, who brings God close to us, with grace and mercy. He is the Light of the world; the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the Savior who sets us free for life with God.

It seems like a lot to say about a newborn baby, but that just reminds us that Christmas is all about anticipation. Christmas points us to look for what is coming, the future of life and blessing that has been born into this world along with the Christ child. In our gospel reading for tonight, Luke tells of angels announcing the good news to shepherds: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to God's people on earth. I wonder if we can hear the angels' song as a way of naming how God comes to us, and what that means for you, not just tonight, but tomorrow, next week, next month, for the rest of your life—how God greets you with grace and mercy.

There are two parts to the angel's announcement. First, the birth of Jesus means glory to God. Praise and honor are due to God because God has done what human beings could never do. By coming to us with love and forgiveness, God has acted to interrupt humanity's self-serving and simultaneously self-defeating way of living. God comes to lead us in a way of living that truly gives life. By coming to us with grace and mercy, God has bridged the chasm of estrangement between us and God so that we can know the life that we were meant for, a life of connection, of reconciliation and healed relationships with God, with each other and with creation. It is such a great wonder that it invites us to also give glory to God with our whole lives, by the way we care for our neighbors, care for the communities we belong to, and care for the earth. Glory to God!

Secondly, the birth of Jesus means peace to God's people on earth. Jesus' whole life is about reconciliation—between us and God, so that all of us prodigal children can be at peace with our Creator and at peace with ourselves. It's also reconciliation for the human family, so that we

can live together in a neighborly kind of way. The way Jesus leads, and the way we follow, means living with compassion and forgiveness, with humility and generosity, with open and inclusive community. And for us, this not only means peace. It's also our hope, hope that Jesus leads the way into a future that shines bright with love. Jesus opens the mystery of our lives for us, so we can see the life we were meant for—and it's all about love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.