

Christmas Eve - December 24th, 2015

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Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20

“And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

Tonight is the night to savor this story. To ponder in our hearts the story of the babe in the manger. To treasure the miracle and mystery of God coming to earth as a tiny human infant.

Tonight we picture the shepherds in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. We imagine - we almost can hear - the singing of the angels. We strive to imagine the wonder the shepherds must have felt as they knelt in awe before God's messengers.

It's a beautiful story. A familiar, beloved, beautiful story, that helps us capture the sense of wonder and mystery of this season.

I've always loved Christmas Eve best of all the moments in this season because we get this time here to stop and savor the story. To think about the kind of God we have, who loves us in such a personal, intimate way that he became a human and lived a human life like us among us.

God experienced the joys and the love and the challenges of a human family. He made friends. He played, as a child and perhaps as an adult as well! God enjoyed meals with loved ones. And even “strangers” were His loved ones. He got tired and he slept.

God saw those around him get hurt, or sick, or hurt each other. Sometimes he healed them. Sometimes he wept at their graves. God experienced the ranging joys and sorrows of human life.

And He didn't experience them as some sort of “divine tourist”. He didn't visit to “find out” or “get a glimpse” of what it's like to be a human. No, He experienced human life out of a pure love for His creations.

In His love for every man, woman, and child he drew near to us to be with us in our own joys and sorrows. God loves each human being so deeply that he took on a human heart and feels our delights, our yearnings, and our pains as intimately as anyone ever could.

And this intimacy and compassion encompassed even grief and loss. And even His own death. Because God came to earth as Jesus Christ, he tasted death. And he broke through death and rose again, blazing a trail for us to follow.

And so now human life, with its joys and sorrows, does not have to be tinged by so much sorrow. Now the griefs of sickness, injury, pain, division, death - deep griefs - are also tinted with hope.

Because injury, illness, estrangement, death - none of them are the end. None of them have the last word on human life.

Life is the end. Or rather, there is no end, only life.

God's love is the last word. The eternal Word.

As we set the gazes of our hearts on the scenes of the Christmas story - the child, the mother, the father, the animals and the manger, the shepherds and the angels - all the beautiful elements of the Christmas story, I can't help but think that if we zoom in - if we look more closely, if we could get right down next to Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, it would seem a little messier.

The stable is dirty, maybe cold. Perhaps Mary and Joseph worry about baby Jesus. Is he warm enough? How could they have come to point of going through labor in a stable?

They're likely immensely tired, and wondering what to do next. Can they make it home safe with a delicate newborn and a newly delivered mother?

The shepherds are unexpected. And the makeshift delivery room they find themselves in is probably very odd for them. This whole event is strange, unexpected, probably rather stressful for all involved! Full of many challenges, anxieties, and difficulties.

And no less beautiful, for all that.

God's coming into the world didn't remove all difficulties, even for Mary and Joseph. Honestly, He brought them quite a few difficulties. But He did bless their whole lives with His Presence. He drew near even to their worries and fears with His love.

In becoming human, God draws near to every human heart. Even yours. And he blesses and offers to fill each heart with His unexpected, miraculous, beautiful Presence.

Amen.