

“God Comes to Us”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2020

Luke 2: 1-20

One of the things I have found myself doing more these last couple of months is looking back through old photos. Perhaps it is fueled by something deep in my subconscious, but I am drawn to looking at pictures from when things were “normal.” Vacations at the beach with my family, mission trips with the youth and adults, activities and worship services here at church – they all remind me of how we used to spend our time together, and how one day in the future we will spend it together again.

As I was trying to find new pictures to use on our Facebook page this Advent and Christmas, I came across the pictures Craig Johnson took one year ago tonight here in the sanctuary. Craig is a fabulous photographer, and it was mesmerizing to look at the pictures he took of our candlelight Christmas Eve service last year. To see the sanctuary full of people, shoulder-to-shoulder, their faces illuminated by the light from their candles – it warmed my heart and soul. To see faces of women and men who sat in these pews, but in the year since have entered into God’s eternal kingdom – it broke my heart and soul. As I looked at those pictures, it seemed like ages ago, when in fact it was only twelve months earlier.

That is our reminder of how quickly life can change. A pandemic that begins less than three months after Christmas Eve forces us to worship this evening in a way we never thought would be necessary. The death of a loved one causes us to see this evening through lenses that have a much different shade than previous years. A diagnosis and course of treatment means that we are not seeing those we love in-person, even though our whole being aches to be with them. The year 2020 has most certainly taught us all that life can change very quickly indeed.

Because of the coronavirus’ spread and high infection rate right now, we are all having to make changes to holiday traditions we never thought would be necessary. Our family has exchanged gifts with both of our mothers and other family members in parking lots and driveways over the last week. This is because the four of us will be staying at home on Christmas Day, and we will Zoom or video call our family as we open presents. I’m sure many of you are having to do things differently this year, and that is full of angst and pain and yearning for the norm to return. And we as a church have been forced to adapt and change throughout this turbulent year. The mere fact that more of you are watching this service online than are here in-person in the sanctuary, on Christmas Eve, is the greatest illustration of that point.

This night, some of us are filled with joy, hope, and expectation. This night, many of us are filled with anxiety, fear, and weariness. This night, all of us are yearning for God to do a new thing – to heal, to restore, to enlighten our lives once again.

And no matter who we are or where we are this night, God comes to us. Traditions may be cast aside, worship services may not be the same, our lives may be totally different than a year ago – but God still comes to us this holy night. The babe in the manger, the gift of a generous, loving God, the one who was promised by prophets of old – Emmanuel, God-with-us, has come to us this day.

That affirmation of faith came to me as I read the Christmas story once again this week. I thought of the characters in the familiar narrative and how they must have wondered what God was thinking, or if God was still with them, as they made their way to Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago.

There was Mary, who had this puzzling, startling encounter with God's messenger, Gabriel, telling her she would give birth to the Son of God. She received this news faithfully but I'm sure also with a bit of trepidation, and then sang of God's glory when she met her relative, Elizabeth, who was expecting her own God-given birth. Now, she's nine-months pregnant, on the back of a donkey, traveling to Bethlehem because of a government census, and she and her fiancé cannot even find a decent room when her water breaks.

There was Joseph, who loved Mary deeply but was in total shock to learn she was expecting a child. He is tempted to walk away, but after his own encounter with God in a dream (Matthew 1), he is convinced to stay with her through better or worse. He just wants to make sure she is safe and comfortable, and making a trip to Bethlehem was not part of the plan. But he doesn't want to be in trouble with the government, so they go. Now he is stressed and anxious because there's no place indoors for her to give birth, and they're forced to settle into the animal's stall behind the local inn.

There were the shepherds, who were in the fields outside of town, sleeping alongside their sheep. They didn't have much, were probably in the lower class of society, and others around town looked the other way when they saw them. It was a cold, peaceful night – just like so many other nights – when they are startled awake by a messenger of God. This night will not be like other nights, to be sure, and they are frightened beyond belief.

God came to Mary, reassuring her that despite this great change in her life, she would not be left alone. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." As the shepherds came to share what had been made known to them, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Amid great uncertainty, God came near to Mary and promised to never leave her.

God came to Joseph, convincing him that the plan was not being altered, and that God would provide and keep him, his bride-to-be, and his newborn son safe. God would come to Joseph again, after the Magi come and pay Jesus homage, by instructing him to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt, away from the wrath of Herod. Amid great anxiety and worry, God came near to Joseph and promised never to leave him.

God came to the lowly shepherds, who were the first recipients of God's good news to the world – not the privileged and high society of that time. "Do not be afraid – I bring you good news of great joy for all the people; the Savior of the world is born to you this day." Their legs and feet were likely strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit as they ran to the manger in Bethlehem to bear witness to

what had been told them. Amid frightening and unexplainable occurrences, God came near to the shepherds promising them hope and joy for all the world.

God did not leave these servants on their own amid their unease and anxiety. God came to them, God reassured them, God supported them, God loved them, God fulfilled God's promise to them. In a time and year that has been filled with so much unease and anxiety, we can trust that God comes to us this night – just as God came to our world in a manger in Bethlehem.

To the caregiver whose loved one is dying, who feels as if the world has become very small and narrow, and who yearns for contact with the rest of the world – God comes and says, “Do not be afraid – you are not alone, for I will always be with you.”

To the young adult who is struggling to know his place in the world, who doesn't fit in with family or friends because of changes he's going through, and who isn't sure what's next for him in life – God comes and says, “Do not be afraid – you are not alone, for I will always be with you.”

To the child whose parent is no longer with him, who faces his first Christmas as an orphan; to the parents whose child is gone and all that is left is a gaping whole in their hearts full of grief – God comes and says, “Do not be afraid – you are not alone, for I will always be with you.”

To the happy and joyful this Christmas Eve; to the sad and disconsolate this Christmas Eve; to the healthy and active, to the sick and isolated; to the young and old, the poor and wealthy – “to all the people,” as the angels said to the shepherds, God comes and says, “Do not be afraid – born to you this day is a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

This year has felt very much like the land of deep darkness which Isaiah speaks of – a year full of stops and starts, stress and worry, sickness and death. We yearn for hope, for healing, for newness, for light.

And in our darkness, God comes to us. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” Many of us witnessed the “great conjunction” of Jupiter and Saturn this week in the night sky, forming what many nicknamed “The Christmas Star,” for how brightly the two shone together. This hasn't happened in hundreds of years, and scientists say it is pure coincidence that it happened so close to the winter solstice and Christmas.

I don't know about you, but I grabbed hold of that “coincidence” this week and took it as a sign of hope amid so much darkness. I took it as a sign in the night sky that God is still at work in this universe, still pointing us to God's grace and love that directed shepherds and Magi to a small animal's stall in Bethlehem. I gave thanks that I could still feel wonder and amazement and awe at what God is doing around me, when so much of this year has been spent asking God, “Why?!” For me – and maybe for you, too – that great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn this week was my reminder that God comes to us, God is coming to us, and God will continue to come to us, shining the light of hope into whatever darkness we are in.

“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.