

The Rev. Kerith Harding
Christmas Reflection 2017

Tonight, once again, we are invited into the greatest of stories. Once again, we gather here like children at story hour, listening to the tale that changed the world, the tale of the shepherds tending their sheep by night, who in the blackness of the night are greeted with a radiant light and an impossible message: "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."

This is the story that we hear year after year but which never gets old. These are the hymns and carols we sing year after year and which never get old.

This is the story iconographers and artists depict with precision and artistry, and at which we never tire of looking.

It is one of the world's oldest stories, and yet here we are, drawn to it, eager to listen to it, so joyful that it happened.

Why is that?

Think about it — it never changes.

There's never a twist.

Mary doesn't have twins, her girlfriends don't show up with balloons and a stroller. Same story, for 2000 years. You'd think we'd get bored, but we don't! So what makes it so special, so magnetic? How has it so successfully captured the human heart?

First, this is not like other great stories like, say, Harry Potter — wonderful though those books are. (Not knocking Harry Potter!!)

But the story of Jesus' birth is not an imagined tale of wizards and intrigue. No one sat at a desk and dreamed it up.

There are no magic wands.

It doesn't transport us *away* from our reality; rather, the nativity story shuttles us directly *into* reality — our reality and God's reality.

Jesus' birth actually happened, all those years ago.

A baby was born, and if he weren't none of us would be sitting here tonight, eager to hear the story once again.....

We are creatures made by God with God's own imprint on our hearts, and we naturally, organically, seek God out, and find God always in the deepest part of our hearts where we ourselves are most vulnerable and honest and real.

This is a **real** story that summons from us all that is true about ourselves and about the God who made us: **that we are extravagantly loved and known.**

Second, this is not an ordinary birth story.

We've all been born and we all could probably tell stories of when others were born — the labor, the location, the baby finally emerging into the world in a cry of surprise.

Tonight's Gospel is a birth story, but it is not a birth story that is confined to the **past**, the way every other birth story is.

This one still happens.

Jesus' birth isn't a one-time event; Jesus' birth is a template, a moment in the world where God showed us in no uncertain terms that God is to be found in human form.

That God is alive in the human heart,
that God is born in places and in people the world deems unimportant,
born in those who wander far from home,
born even when we shut the door on him, refusing God entrance.

God is not content to send us a Savior and then sit back like an absentee landlord; God is always this busy, this dogged in his effort to reveal to us that the darkness of loss or loneliness or illness will never swallow us whole.

Light shines in that darkness.

And this promise is meant for the wise men
and it is meant for the lowly shepherd's,
and it is meant for you and for me.

Finally, what makes this story so different, is that it's not a story that happened to someone else's family.

Ali and I recently caught up with some friends who had a baby last week, and it's a great story — and I loved it.

But it is very much their son's story, their family's story.

It is not my story to share; it's theirs.

But Jesus' birth is *our* story.

We are the family this has happened to.

All of us gathered here get to sing about it,

we get read it, listen to it, and tell it to others because it is our story.

This happened to *us*.

And whether you sit in these pews once a week or once a year God is very clear on this in scripture: this gift is for *all* of us,

without measure,

without cost,

and utterly free.

God's great act of love does not obligate us or compel us;

for this amazing gift we owe God nothing, there will not be an invoice.

But you will find that if you let it seep inside your heart, it inspires a deep love for God and others in return,

and that love glows,

it is warm and it is bright, and it casts out darkness.

And this is our legacy simply because we are human beings,

made by a God whose love is like rain,

falling on the good and the not so good in equal kind.

Therefore only this story can be told the same way year after year, and each year be a different story.

And it's all because of where we stand.

Isaiah tells us that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." The shepherds stand in the black darkness of the fields,

pre-electricity darkness,

thick darkness,

and an angel appears.....

Each year, the darkneses each of us has traveled is different.
Somewhere this past year, more than a few of us, I imagine, lost our footing.

Maybe some of us come here tonight wishing our lives were a bit less dark, wishing we could see down the road a bit further to see what the future holds in store for us.

Maybe we feel a bit lost and wonder if we are on the right track, and we wonder if the road we are walking is the right road.

Maybe the night sky feels darker because we lost someone we love, or someone we love is struggling.

Each year, we arrive at the manger needing some good news, needing warmth, needing light.

And each year the good news we seek is different, and yet completely the same: we seek assurance that God is with us,

that God is alive,

that God tenderly loves us.

Something in our hearts, no matter how cynical or crusty or “too smart for this” we’ve become, makes its way to the baby in the manger because we believe God’s great promise: that unto us is born a Savior,

unto us is born Godself, alive and human;

that God loves us beyond cost and beyond measure.

And because this story feels too good to be true, we need to hear it again and a again.

Tonight we celebrate this “good news of great joy.”

We celebrate a baby whose birth happened to us all,

whose birth still happens,

and whose light, impossible though it may sometimes seem, shines in the fields of darkness.

This is our story.

May the trumpets of the angels ring in your hearts and may the manger draw you in with its warmth and its love.

May this Christ child fill your lives with light.

And may you all have a very merry Christmas. AMEN.