

December 24, 2017 • Christmas Eve • Candlelight Service

## **“God So Loves the World!”**

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 2:1-20

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “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.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Isn't it wonderful to gather for worship on this most sacred and holy night? Something draws us to come together into the presence of God. Something tugs deep in our hearts, calling us out of our normal routines, out of our lethargy and complacency, drawing us towards something wondrous. It's happening this very night. Are we ready? Do we see it? Are our hearts open?

Sometimes, as we're going along through our days, we can miss really amazing stuff going on all around us. For some of us, our days are way too busy, crazy-busy, and we simply hope to make it through. For some of us, time moves all too slowly and a kind of loneliness and emptiness can drag us down. Some of us aren't sure where we're going or have lost a sense of why we're doing what we're doing and so we move along, day by day, hoping for light to shine. Hoping for a renewed sense of purpose and joy.

This night is for all of us. Whoever we are. However we come. However it is that we've managed to make our way tonight back to Bethlehem, back to the manger, back to this birth---this night is for us.

And, meanwhile, when we're not looking, amazing things are happening all around us. You know, just last Sunday, three astronauts blasted off headed for the International Space Station. How long has it been since you even thought about the International Space Station? Yet it's up there, all the time. While we're down here on earth slogging along, while nations seem endlessly trapped in recriminations and violence, all the while, that faithful crew is way up there in space conducting investigations in biology, Earth science, physical sciences and technology development — research designed to impact and enhance life on earth.

And international it is! Never mind what's happening down here on crazy earth. These guys have their act together. The latest three to go up, blasting off from the base in Kazakhstan—three astronauts--one American, one Japanese, one Russian. In a tiny space capsule hurtling through space. Their safety, their very lives, dependent on one another's skill and expertise and calm should an emergency arise. Hurtling nine hours through space to join the work of together seeking knowledge for the common good of all humankind.

Now I don't know about you, but that gives me hope. If we can do that, we can do almost anything we put our minds to. Astronauts Tingle, Shkaplerov, and Kanai—three modern-day wise men, if you will, not on camels now but in a space capsule, still following the stars in the quest of wisdom. Venturing beyond, way beyond, the confines of gravity, the confines of earthly saber-rattling and acrimony, venturing beyond language barriers and narrow-mindedness, transcending all that to explore something new, to create a new future together, for the sake of the world.

They're up there right now. Working away, no doubt. Maybe wondering what Christmas will be like on earth this year...

Last October, Pope Francis called the International Space Station to bring the crew greetings and reflect with them on their work. He quoted the last verses of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*: “My desire and will were turned...by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.” And then the Pope asked the astronauts: “what does it mean to call “Love” the force that moves the universe?”

Astronaut Randy Bresnick, a graduate of Samohi, an Iraq war veteran born in Kentucky, told him: “What gives me the greatest joy every day is to be able to look outside and see God's creation a little bit from his perspective. People cannot come up here and see the indescribable beauty of the earth and not be touched in their souls—we see the peace and serenity of our planet...no borders, no conflict....and realize how fragile our existence here is.”

Now, as I imagined those three astronauts joining Bresnick and the others, traversing space up into the heavens, I imagined them moving in a great arc through the sky. And because it was all happening this week, I juxtaposed that image with a vision of God simultaneously coming down to earth, to Bethlehem, where God's great gift of love would be born anew in Christ Jesus.

And I wondered if maybe they passed somewhere up in sky amongst the stars, the astronauts and God, moving in different directions, all for the sake of humankind. Their mission for knowledge and for a better world. God's mission of love for us and for our salvation. The great God of all creation, the God of all time and all space, the God beyond human imagining and telling---this great God, for our sake and for our salvation, out of love choosing to become flesh, to become one of us. Unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given.

The truth and power of God's love is exactly the gift we need in these days of turmoil, stress, and striving. God loved, loves, and will always love each and every one of us, each and every one of God's beloved children, each and every part of this beautiful creation. In God's love our hearts our healed, our vision renewed, and our hope restored. God so loves the world!

That's the other amazing thing happening this very night that we might not see if we're not paying attention. If our hearts aren't open, we might miss it, again. We might leave God's beautiful gift at the door, still wrapped, still waiting to be discovered and claimed by each and all of us.

But if we dare go with God all the way down to Bethlehem and find that babe lying in a manger...and if we see the Babe through the eyes of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the angels and the Wise Men, if we see him through the eyes of the prophets and the faithful of all times, then we will be changed, from the inside out, and we and the whole world will be made new.

Fifty years ago today on Christmas Eve 1967, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. He said that in order to achieve peace on earth "we must develop a world perspective..." He said: "we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny...We are made to live together..."

From the distant perspective of space, the astronauts see the indescribable beauty of earth, its peace and serenity, "the Love that moves the universe". God sees and reveals this love from the intimate perspective of the birth of a baby, a birth that reveals to us a whole new world of mutuality, love, and peace.

The real miracle of this holy night is about opening to the amazing things going on within and around us all the time. It's about opening God's gift and opening our hearts. It's about saying YES to God, saying—yes, I will make room for you in my heart. Yes—I want to be part of the miracle of this holy night. Yes, God--I want to be part of the amazing things you are doing in this world for love.

So now, before we light the Christ Candle to signify the holy birth, and before we light our own candles to show forth the light of Christ shining in us, let us be in silent prayer and reflection for a few moments.

Take a deep breath. Invite Christ to be born in you, embracing now a renewed sense of your capacity to be made whole, to do good and to make a difference. And let Love, the force that moves the universe, move us just that much closer to rebirth and a world made new.

#### Notes:

Rose Marie Berger, "The Pope Makes (Very) Long-Distance Call," January 2018: Sojourners.

Drew Dellinger, "Dr. King's Interconnected World." December 23, 2017: The New York Times.

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