

Christmas Eve (2006)

Text: Luke 2:1-20

A teacher in a public school tells about leading a group of first graders during the Christmas season in a study of Christmas customs around the world. In telling the Christmas story that is at the heart of the Christian tradition she explained how Mary and Joseph went back to Bethlehem and there was no room in the inn. She compared the inn to a hotel or motel. In leading up to the stable she asked, "What do you suppose they had behind the inn?" One little kid blurted out, "A swimming pool."

Luke's story of the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary and the Son of God being conceived in her womb and being nurtured there is truly unique. But there is another sense in which this needs to be repeated in our lives.

For just as the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, surely it is our longing to, that the Spirit would come upon us; that God would be born in us and nurtured in us. And that just as Mary gave birth to the one who would transform the world in love, so we seek to give birth to a transforming love in the words and deeds that spring from the presence of God within us.

The difficulty with this is that in my life there is too often too much clutter for God to nurture this transforming love. There are too many preoccupations and too little space for the transforming love of God.

I recently read a story of an old priest who presided over a great cathedral in a once-prosperous city. The kindly priest

spent his days praying in the vestry and caring for the poor. As a result of his tireless work, this great building was known as a place of safety and sanctuary. A constant stream of people came to this place seeking shelter.

The priest welcomed all who came to the door and gave completely without prejudice or restraint. His hospitality was famous and his heart was known to be pure. No one could steal from him, for he considered no possession his own.

One evening in mid-winter, while the priest was praying before the cross, there was a knock on the cathedral door. The priest stood and went to the entrance. Opening the door he was surprised to find there a terrifying demon with unyielding eyes.

“Old man,” the demon hissed, “I have traveled many miles to seek your shelter. Will you welcome me in?”

Without hesitation the priest bid the devil welcome and invited him into the shelter of the church. Once across the threshold this devil spat venom onto the tiled floor and attacked the holy altar, all the while uttering blasphemies and curses.

During this time the priest knelt on the floor and continued in his devotions until it was time for him to retire for the evening.

“Old man,” cried the demon, “where are you going?”

“I am returning home to rest, for it has been a long day,” replied the kindly priest.

“May I come with you,” said the demon, “as I too am tired and in need of a place to eat and sleep.”

“Why yes of course,” replied the priest, “come, and I will prepare a meal.”

On returning to his house the priest prepared a meal while the devil smashed the artifacts that adorned the house. He ate the meal provided by the priest and then asked, “Old man, you welcomed me into your church and then into your house. I have one more request. Will you welcome me into your soul?”

“Why of course,” said the priest. “What I have is yours and what I am is yours.”

So the devil entered his soul, but there was nothing in the old man for the devil to cling to, no material of which to make a nest and no darkness in which to hide. All that existed in the old priest’s soul was light. And so the devil turned from the priest in disgust and left, never to return.

In fact, the devil retired from his devilish work not long after that for something in the old man so affected the devil that he lost his edge for it and so never could do his devilish work again.

After taking some time to tidy his house, the priest went to his room and drifted off to sleep, all the time wondering who would visit him next.

If only we could be like this priest, if only light could dwell within then we could be true servants, there would be space for the transforming love of God to grow and be nurtured and we could say with the priest whose soul was full of light, “What I have is yours and what I am is yours.”

But what I find is a strange paradox—my life tends to be filled with empty things. And these empty things take up the space where the love of God could grow and flourish. I have to honestly admit that all too often my soul becomes a breeding ground for all kinds of attachments and preoccupations.

You know sisters and brother the fears and selfishness that is in most of us has found a home there, and they do not leave without a struggle.

What needs to be born in each one of us this Christmas season, and not just at Christmas but all through the year, is the transforming love of God. But for this to happen we must make room; we must create space for God’s love to grow.

Peter Rollins in his book, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, says, “To be a Christian is to be born of love, transformed by love and committed to transforming the world with love.” Then he says, “This is not something done by working

ourselves up and trying to find the right way of thinking and acting, but rather in letting go and opening up to the transforming power of God. In so doing, we will not merely sit around describing God to the world, but rather, we will become the iconic spaces in which God is made manifest in the world.” (p. 71).

In 1 John 3:14 the writer says that this is how we know that we have passed from death to life, because we love one another. It’s not about believing, it’s about loving—that’s the fruit of the Spirit, that’s the evidence that God is within us—it’s because we love. And brothers and sisters, I don’t care what a person believes, if love is there, God is there.

And Jesus Christ, our Lord has come to show us how to love. The way we make space for love to grow in us is by following and obeying Christ, it is by pursuing the way of justice and compassion that Jesus fleshed out for us. It is by committing ourselves to pursue his way of serving and giving—his way of including and caring for others. And the more we follow Christ in his way of compassion and service the more space we make for love and the less space there is for greed and anger and jealousy and pride.

The truth that the Christmas story conveys is that God can come into any life any time regardless of the circumstances. Our lives may not look at all like the Christmas cards we send and receive; our lives may be a mess—no matter. The Christ who was born in a stable can be born in any heart that will give him room.

Being Christian is not about believing the story; it's about living the story, it's about the transforming love of God being born in us, growing in us, and flowing through us and emanating from us to transform the world.

Our good and gracious God,

I pray that we might long for you tonight. For any longing is evidence that your Spirit is within. And if we don't long for you I pray that we would long to long for you. For that too is a sign of your presence.

Help us to let go of all those things that crowd and clutter our souls—that keep us from knowing your love. Help us to commit our lives once again to pursuing the way of Christ so that the light of your love may dispel the darkness of hate and selfishness and fill us with your grace and compassion. In the name of the One who is the light of the world we pray. Amen.

I draw this light from the Christ candle and it represents the transforming love of God that became incarnate in Christ. As we receive of this light let us open our hearts so that the light of God's transforming love can transform us and transform our world.