

Christmas Eve  
Year B 2017  
'Let us be gentle disciples'

Christmas affects everybody. Whether you are a harried traveler, shopper, parent, child, or Santa Claus – you will encounter Christmas. It is easy to miss the point. It is up to you – to us – to break out of business as usual and receive God's future.

It seems that in 2017, we all moved farther apart – not geographic distance, but in the growing distance between us – in understanding, in willingness to address our differences, in language and behaviors which we find acceptable. A local church posted this sign by its doors: "Glory to God and Peace to Men". Interpret as you will – the gender specific is not the word of Scripture.

The psalm urges us to 'sing a new song', and so we should. It is time.

The Christmas story of Scripture is the antithesis of 'home for the holidays'. Matthew's and Luke's gospels are about journey away from home: Joseph and Mary travel for the census, wise men and shepherds travel to see the baby. Journeying *from* places of comfort, to seek this new thing that God is doing, God's future.

Matthew's story focuses on men - Joseph's genealogy, the wise men, the wicked king Herod. Luke's nativity story focuses on women, Mary and Elizabeth. Woven together, these two gospels form the Christmas story we tell and retell in Christmas pageants across the world.

Thank God for angels! Their consistent opening words are "*do not be afraid.*" The word 'angel' in Greek means messenger – '*do not fear*' is a message from God. So says the angel Gabriel to Mary before telling her about the child to come. Luke 1:30. So says the angel to the shepherds before telling them about the birth of the Christ child. Luke 2:10.

These were not small fears. These were earthshaking, world changing, cymbal crashing, drum roll announcements. God is breaking into time and space, exploding into this world!

*'Do not be afraid'* heralds a vision of light and a message so amazing as to be – not believable, unless we are willing to grasp it in our hearts. God's power concentrated in this moment in a single newborn babe. An entire heavenly chorus appears to the shepherds – not a single candle flickering in the dark, but a light that invades and fills all the space and makes the space holy.

The prophet Isaiah said, "*the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*" Isaiah may not have been talking about Jesus, but what he said resonates today because we, too, often walk in darkness. We seek the holy light and we need the angel's message, *do not be afraid.*

At Christmas, God's light comes as a baby, seemingly helpless and vulnerable and yet powerful beyond our imagining. A baby's arrival reorganizes us: our schedules, our homes, our lives – we

make space for the baby. We sing a new song, re-tuning long forgotten lullabies from our childhood. A lot of new, raw emotions surface when a new life is brought into the world. Love, devotion, and the strong desire to never be away from the little person.

We allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Brene Brown, author of *Daring Greatly*, wrote, ‘*vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity.*’

Mary knows better than anyone what it means to wait for Christ. She awaits him as his mother, knowing the mystery of his coming, the God who works wonders. The simple miracle of human birth. The fragility, the gift and risk of human life. Mary, the wife of a carpenter, a poor workingman’s wife, homeless at the birth – and blessed, significant to God.

Luke’s Gospel invites us to journey to the manger to sit with Mary.

Let us also sit with Mashyla Buckmaster, a twenty-four year old woman from Aberdeen, WA. She has Section 8 housing for herself and her daughter. For five years, though, she was homeless and found shelter in an empty building. A neighbor, enraged that homeless people were living on his block, assaulted her, throwing a log through the window. Today, Mashyla is a volunteer at Chaplains on the Harbor, a ministry of the Episcopal church. She helps out at their cold weather shelter. She says her community stepped up to save her life and now it’s her turn. Mashyla was recently in Washington, D.C. gathering support for the nationwide Poor People’s Campaign. “*I need a movement as tough as I am,*” she said. She is strong, she is assertive. But not self-assertive. She is gentle in the way that Jesus was gentle. In the way Mary was gentle.

The Greek word used for gentle (*praus*) is defined in the classic lexicon as ‘not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.’

Our Western culture doesn’t really respect gentleness. We think of gentleness as a matter of style, doling out chocolate chip cookies and hugs, speaking softly. Gentleness is not a matter of gender, or personality. It is a character trait.

Jesus was forceful, even confrontational, yet gentle because he used his power for others.

In the December issue of Christian Century magazine, M. Craig Barnes (Princeton Theological Seminary) relates this experience officiating at a wedding:

*He was a burly, muscular lineman for his college football team. He spent years going nose to nose with opponents on the field, but now he was standing at the altar with his petite bride, reciting marital vows. He said most of the traditional things like “in sickness and health’ but then he added a clause no one saw coming: “and I will always be gentle with you.” .....[this] has inspired my understanding of how Christians should face each other: in gentleness.*

*How (we) should face each other: in gentleness.* Gentleness is not weakness; nor is it a fragile thing. It stems from courage, confidence, from those who honor relationships and find strength in vulnerability. People grounded in the grace of God. What is God's mercy if not God's gentleness towards us?

God's coming as an infant is about gentleness. A metaphor, if you will, to help us grasp that gentleness comes from strength.

Still, we know that the strong have a propensity to become bullies. There are examples of bullying in every arena of life, across cultures and socio-economic status. Around the world we see autocratic leaders gaining in power. To at least half the country – or half of those here tonight – our leaders seem to have lost their reason, sounding like playground bullies, with their talk about nuclear war, rolling back gains in human rights and health care.

What new thing might God be doing in us?

The nativity story reminds us that God trusts us – ordinary people – to receive his living Word, to treasure and to wonder about this mystery of God's love for us.

Connect our images of hope with God's gentleness. Being gentle with each other. Using our strength to be gentle, not to proclaim power over others. The question is not how strong we are, but how we use our strength.

We will not find gentleness in factionalism, in partisanship – those are places where we think in terms of 'them' and us. We are unwilling to be gentle with people we label as 'them'.

Through Jesus' ministry we learn that gentleness is compatible with blunt language and direct action, assertive but not self-assertive. The death of Jesus on the cross was not the weak being victimized by the strong, but the story of One who chose gentleness, life in humility.

The Rev. Barnes concludes in *Christian Century*, (paraphrasing), Those of us in positions of influence and privilege have a holy calling to use our strength for others, to be humble and gentle toward others.

*If we don't give ourselves to the poor, not only will we fail to do the justice required of us, but we'll also never find the Christ who is waiting to enter the holy space within our embrace."*

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel suggested that holy space is created when God's creatures come together.

Jesus promised something similar: The prayer of St. Chrysostom in our BCP reads, "*When two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them.*"

We leave that holy space when we move apart.

Holy space springs up between us when we gather around the manger, when we gather as families and congregations at Christmas, when we gather peaceably with strangers to our beliefs and customs.

In this Holy space, we create opportunities to cooperate with what God is doing in our world.

Tonight, we share the joy that every mother knows. Hope and grace lie ahead: holy space created and filled by the light of God.

Trust gentleness. Trust the message of Christmas.

Joy according to God's Word.

Amen.

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