

God's Love Never Gives Up
5:30 p.m. Christmas Eve, Friday, December 24, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

Good evening All Saints. In the middle of one of those crazy days, not too long ago, I was driving in my car when a song began to play. It surprised me because I hadn't intended to play music and I almost turned it off. It was a tune I didn't recognize because it was put on my playlist by my daughter a number of years ago before she had a phone of her own. As I listened, its words and melody touched me in an unexpected way. It had been a difficult week, and it's been a challenging year for all of us! I was weary with many things on my mind and heart. Right there, in that moment, the words felt like they could be God's Spirit of encouragement for me.

When I look into your eyes
It's like watching the night sky
Or a beautiful sunrise
There's so much they hold

And just like the old stars
I see that you've come so far
To be right where you are
How old is your soul?

I won't give up on us, no I'm not giving up
Even if the skies get rough
I'm giving you all my love
I'm still looking up, look up!
We're alive, we are loved
God won't give up

Those words came back to me as I anticipated speaking to you on this holy night, when we remember the old story of ancient stars and a tiny baby born. The Christmas message tells us God did not, will not give up on us. On this night, at that moment of deep incarnation, God was giving us all Her love. And that my friends, is what Christmas is all about.

So I wonder on this night of wonders, if there is something in our Christmas story that might be just what you need to hear—that we need to hear—something that is meant to touch us in a deep and surprising way. I believe there is, and I ask God's Spirit to find you right where you are this night, and draw you into the expansive love of God that never gives up.

The Christmas story unfolds in a time of turbulence and polarization that may remind us of our own. Luke links Jesus's birth with a decree of the Roman emperor. Remember, that Jesus was born in a land where imperial might held sway. The Jewish people had suffered from brutal domination for nearly 600 years as the region was ruled by a succession of superpower empires

leading up to Roman rule. Domination is costly, and the decree for a census was not a benign act, but done so that Rome could exact taxes for expansion of its reach and to maintain tight grip over all it already controlled. For the poor, the decree meant wringing every last drop out of an already dry and thread-bare cloth. Based on the facts surrounding them, there was little reason for the Jewish people to hope.

Their world was strictly divided up by ethnicity, gender, and class; a hierarchy of those with access to power and those without. Only property owners were registered in the census. Few women—and no children or slaves—were included. They literally didn't count, like immigrants in our own country today. From the narrative, we don't know if Joseph asked Mary to come with him on the journey to Bethlehem, but we can assume he weighed the risks of travel and her pending delivery, and decided to bring her with him.

The very act of giving birth during the first century was very dangerous for all women, as it is today for those who are poor and disenfranchised. Mortality in childbirth was high especially for mothers in their early teens. Nonetheless, Mary gave birth to Jesus in a guest room, not unlike the room in which he will celebrate the passover with his disciples later in life. Because the room was on the level where animals were fed, it gave Mary and Joseph more warmth and privacy. On a theological level, placing the newborn in a feeding trough in Bethlehem (which translates as "house of bread") symbolized that this child will be as food for a world hungry for hope.

It is worth noting that Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus, does not give Mary words. This stands in stark contrast to his first chapter in which the experience and prophetic voices of Elizabeth and Mary took center stage. Luke does allude to her role as the one whose birthing powers and pondering wisdom will carry Jesus throughout his life, until he is again wrapped in bands of cloth at his death. The word for pondered or "treasured" means more than simply storing something away. It has the nuance "to preserve against harm or ruin, to protect" and "to keep in mind, and care about." Mary's pondering action is not in the least bit passive. Like the shepherds, who keep watch, Mary guards all that has occurred, putting things together, connecting the dots, and listening to the wisdom deep within her. She is a womanist theologian, continually interpreting what God is doing in her life and that of her family and her people.

The shepherds in the story remind us of the fullness of the humanity of those early witnesses. They are the ones with whom God chooses to share divine revelation. Pope Francis adds another dimension to what it means to be a shepherd. Shepherds he says, are called to be so embedded with their sheep that they bear their scent. The good news of that night, the good news of every moment of our lives, is that our God loves things by becoming them. God loved us by becoming one of us, born like us into absolute dependence on love.

You see, God loves vulnerability because that is where love dwells. Jesus, the child, will grow, and will live as we might live, continuing to trust and freely depend on God's love. He will be the Good Shepherd, who knows his flock—he who

*“every grief hath known, that wrings the human breast,
and takes and bears them for his own, that all in him may rest.”*

He will share the risks that our communities endure, as well as the joys and hopes.

The deep incarnation of Jesus reveals God as connected with the whole of creation. Just like us, the atoms comprising his body were once part of other creatures . . . kin to the flowers, fish, frogs, finches, foxes, the whole community of life that descends from common ancestors in the ancient seas. Those atoms, like everything else in the universe, are made of stardust. God saves us through Jesus’ solidarity with all that is, and with the power of the Holy Spirit to heal all that we cannot heal ourselves.

In the religion of my childhood, Jesus as savior meant that he saved us from God’s wrath brought on by our sins. Now most of those sins as a teenager in Winona Lake, Indiana had to do with keeping our mouths from swearing and our bodies under control until we married an opposite sexed partner. God, in this view was the ultimate perfectionist who loved us, but confusingly, could also send us or someone else we loved to eternal separation from love. God was portrayed as particularly concerned that we have his name right, and believed the right ideas about him.

It is true, that we need to know who God is. But when we think that God can only love us by requiring the brutal death of his child to make up for our badness, we are bound to live in fear, and we can’t help that from spilling over into relationships with other people in our lives. Hear the good news tonight! Jesus didn’t come because God could not stand our sins, but because She could not bear to stand apart from our suffering. Jesus came not to change God’s mind about us, but to change our minds about God. There is no separation between God and us. Every day, every visit to the grocery store, every moment of our so-ordinary life is meant to reveal the love of God that dwells within us and all things.

God’s infinite love for each person is in no way limited or diminished by the terrible things that person might do. We have no power to stop God from being infinitely in love with us and our brokenness. No matter we’ve done, no matter how terrible we think we are. We are fully loved and cherished.

The story we celebrate tonight tells us one more thing. The world of Mary, Joseph and Jesus was not peaceful or kind. It was turbulent and violent, racist and sexist, chaotic and dangerous, one that might remind us of our own. Yet, God entered that world bursting through all that was bleak and hopeless, proclaiming with all the heavenly hosts—“God hasn’t given up on you”. And God hasn’t given up on us! She certainly doesn’t want us to give up on ourselves!

God has joined us. They have moved right into the neighborhood and pitched their tent with ours, in order to heal every bit of separation and splitness that we experience. This was always the plan, the blueprint of creation, built into to the foundation of all that exists, and nothing can ever stop it.

Take heart my friends. God's love is infinitely greater than the sum total of all the suffering that has been, is, or will be throughout history. It transcends the suffering world and permeates it through and through and through. It shows up in hospice units and in hospitals. It shows up in the complexity of our homes, and on the cold streets with all of our unhoused siblings. God's love walks neighborhoods wracked by gun violence and brutality, and God dwells in the dank corridors of the twin towers and in every county jail.

And sometimes... that love shows up in a synchronistic moment when you hear a song you never knew and it touches you right where you are. God won't give up on you and God won't give up on us. God knows your worth and the worth of all of creation. This night in Christ consciousness, may your soul know it too, and may peace be with you and yours, this holy night.

Amen