

Travel Warnings
Christmas Eve, Saturday, December 24, 2022, 8:00 & 11:00 p.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

There is a moment in birth.

After all the ordeal of labor ...or the trauma of a c-section, or sometimes both ... when the baby has emerged to take their first breath, there is a moment of anxious... silence.

That moment where we are waiting to hear that first cry.

That sign that birth has truly led to new life.

No one is ever more glad to hear a sound in this life than a parent is to hear that first cry.

That cry that means the baby has made the successful transition from the womb to breathing the air of this world.

For all the 2 am cries to come that will have them groaning or saying “your turn.” For all the cries to come they will long to sooth into silence, this is a cry parents long to hear and fear will not come.

And not just that, but because crying is the natural, rational response to being forcibly evicted from a place of safety into a place that is most definitely not, it is a cry that means on some level this child has the sense to say, “What just happened? This is NOT cool!”

And so, with every birth there is a brief moment ... at least we pray it’s a brief moment.

And then there is a cry.

A cry that each one of us has made.

A cry that split the night more than 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem.

That’s right. As I and many others have said before, it was not a Silent Night.

That baby Jesus cried.

Thank God that baby Jesus cried.

Because not only did that mean that baby Jesus was alive and well, it was that child had the sense to know that they had arrived in a world full of sharp edges.

One of my favorite passages of scripture is from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

"Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though they were in the form of God, did not see equality with God as something to be grasped but emptied themselves into human form."

That's not just beautiful poetry.

This is cosmos-shaking stuff we are proclaiming this night.

That God looked at our lives, with all their unpredictability and messiness, God looked at human life and said THAT is where I want to go. Not because life here is safe, but because it is not, and I love these people that much.

About 20 years ago, I was with a group planning a trip to southern Sudan. Now this was before South Sudan was its own country, in fact it was before the comprehensive peace agreement was signed so southern Sudan was still a place of active conflict.

This was the first time I became aware of something called a "travel warning." Travel warnings are put out by the U.S. Government to warn people of the dangers of traveling to certain places ... so that U.S. citizens can make informed choices about where and where not to go.

We were planning this trip because we had entered into a companion relationship with the church in Lui, a tiny village in Southern Sudan. A companion relationship is a way of saying "we are in this together." And yet of course there is a certain amount of fiction to that, isn't there?

There is a certain amount of fiction to saying "we are in this together" when one party has the choice of going somewhere unsafe and the other party has to live in that unsafe place.

There is a certain amount of fiction to saying "we are in this together" when one party can look at the dangers and trauma of where the other is living and has the option of saying "maybe I'll just send a card ... or a check instead."

Travel warnings are creations of privilege. Of being able to choose whether or not we go someplace unsafe. The privilege of being able to choose to stay home ... and to have that home be a place of safety and security.

And there was a travel warning for Sudan. In fact, there was more than a warning, there was a clear statement by the U.S. Government ... Do. Not. Go. There. If something bad happens to you there - and it very well might - you will be on your own.

And so, as we made our decision, we looked at that passage from Philippians, and we looked at the story we tell this night. And we said we absolutely can choose not to go. We absolutely can heed the travel warning. But if we do, we can no longer say we are companions in Christ.

Because the Christ looks at a travel warning and says "Hell, no!" These are my people. And nobody is going to tell me that I can't go be with my people, where they are, as they are.

That's what tonight is about. And that's why when that baby Jesus (*smack hands*) hit the atmosphere, you can bet he cried, because... Damn.

Human life is hard. Human life is messy.

And Jesus was not and is not immune to the hardness and the messiness.
The hardness and the messiness is where Jesus eats his lunch

That's what tonight is about. About a God who doesn't give a DAMN about travel warnings.

And that's important. That's important because every one of us ... every one of our lives ... when we dig deep and get down to it ... has a travel warning.

Come on, you know it.

I mean I know you got all dressed up to come down here.

And I know we are singing Joy to the World.

And I know those Christmas photos y'all are posting on Instagram look like everything is just perfect.

But I also know ... and I know it 'cause I'm one of you ... I know that if we dig deep enough, and frankly probably we don't have to dig too far ... y'all are a hot mess.

It's OK. I'm not going to blow your cover. But just know that I know ... cause I'm one of you. I'm a hot mess, too.

Because when it comes down to it, each one of our lives has a travel warning.

It's not just that it feels like this whole country is just one bad bottle of tequila away from coming apart at the seams.

I'm talking about each of us. Your life. My life. The life of every person in this room and on this earth has places in it with signs that say, "do not go there."

The wounds are too tender.

The ground is too unstable.

The uncertainty is too treacherous.

Especially after the past three years, but really, who are we kidding, even way before that, each one of our lives has a travel warning that says, you can land at my airport, and you can even get out and change planes, and it's even fine with me if you want to count that as actually having visited here but believe me you do NOT want to go past security and into my actual world.

Hey, most of the time we don't even want to go there ourselves. And we can be brilliant at finding the right combination of distraction and self-medication to try to avoid it. We are usually terrified of anyone finding out about those places in our lives much less inviting them to go there.

Each one of our lives has a travel warning. And yet tonight reminds us that we have a God who doesn't give a DAMN about travel warnings.

In fact, it's even more than that. We have a God who uses travel warnings to plan her itinerary.

We have a God who looks at travel warnings the way LeBron James looks at an open lane to the basket. God looks at that messiest part of our lives and her eyes get big, and she says that is right where I am going. Because that's where all the good stuff is. That's the whole point.

So that's the first thing about this Christmas night.

That it's OK.

It's OK that you don't have it all together.

It's OK that underneath the algorithm fodder, you are a hot mess.

Because none of us do and all of us are.

We all have a travel warning, and when that moment of silence passes and we hear that baby cry we can know that it is the messiest, scariest, most out of control parts of our lives that God is literally being born to meet us in.

And the good news about the promise God makes to us, the promise of this night is not that life will be easy or everything will be OK ... that's not real. What's real is that as messy and scary and out of control as it gets we will never, ever have to face any of it alone.

When that baby Jesus cries tonight, it is God saying I see you ... everything about you.

And I love you.

And you are not alone.

I know you might feel alone, but you are not alone

Now now.

Not ever.

And there's even more.

Because God became human not out of a sense of obligation but out of deep abiding love and with profound joy.

Following a Jesus who lives for diving into the lands of travel warnings means we get to do the same. Knowing that God is with us in the messiest and most wounded parts of our lives means we can seek out those places in each other and in the world.

We can reach past the half-truths and outright lies of each other's Instagram feeds and cultivated images and just be real with each other. Go past security and get out of the airport and truly travel together across the real landscape of our lives.

"Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus" Paul sings.

That means just as Christ dives headlong into the travel warning that is our lives because she knows that's where the good stuff is, we don't *have* to do the same, we *GET* to do the same.

Celebrating this holy birth means we are claiming a life where we *GET* to go to all the places that conventional wisdom tells us are too dangerous.

We get to live a life, as a different Paul sings,

*seeking out the poorer quarters
Where the ragged people go
Looking for the places only they would know*

We get to see whatever safety we might have in our lives not as something to be grasped onto fearfully, but as a platform to launch into the most unsafe places, knowing that's where the good stuff, the real stuff, the deepest beauty is. Knowing that is where Christ not only lives but where Christ longs for us to follow.

We get to be a people that fights for justice not from a safe distance but from the very midst of the lives of those among us who are treated most unjustly. Not held prisoner by the fear of travel warnings but using them as the itinerary for our next stops on the journey.

There is a moment in birth.

A moment of anxious... silence.

It's a brief moment ... at least we pray it's a brief moment.

That moment where we are waiting to hear that first cry.

That cry that says, "I see you ... everything about you. And I love you. And you are not alone."

That cry that says to people full of travel warnings in a world full of travel warnings:

I am with you.

Follow me.

We're going in.

AMEN.