

God Loves Vulnerability
Christmas Eve, Saturday, December 24, 2022, 5:30 p.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

Good evening, All Saints, and happy Christmas Eve to all of you here and online!

We come together this evening to hear beautiful music, to celebrate God's presence with us, and to listen once again to the words of an old story.

It is familiar to many of us, and there is comfort in that, as it is read from the gospel of Luke.

As I was writing this sermon, I was aware of a tension between the comfort of the familiar and my hunger for something healing and fresh—something new.

There is comfort in old songs and stories, and yet we also long for and need new connections and experiences to help us see more clearly who God is and who we are.

To find the peace we seek, we need to draw near to God who is closer to us than our own breath.

I wonder on this night what stories you bring with you, and also what longings for something new that might be stirring within you? These times as we struggle to stay healthy, have taken a toll on many.

Who thought we might still need to be careful about being in physical proximity to each other? Or be living through a time when our democracy is under threat?

It is good to hear the prophecy of Isaiah and its fulfillment in Luke, telling the story of our God who is with us even in the bleakest of times.

In both settings, it is business as usual in a world ordered by dominance, division, and violence.

In Isaiah, the northern and southern kingdoms are split apart. The north has been devastated by war and exile, and the people of the south have been taken as vassals.

The emotions expressed in the text are complicated—with contrasting images of the joy of gathering the harvest against gathering the bloody garments of war to be burned.

In Luke, the iron kingdom of Rome imposes a registration to increase taxes on an already occupied and heavily burdened people.

Times were bleak and unsteady.

Jesus' birth is paradoxical.

Joy is birthed within the context of an unwed, young, soon to be immigrant mother of color.

But God's action in our world and our lives is never conscripted by brokenness or bleakness alone.

God is always making life out of deathliness, even when it looks like it can't possibly be true. In Isaiah, the names of God spring forth-- Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

The child promised and then delivered is a son from the line of David, the king.

You see the old story is told to us from a male-centric perspective. We must also add that David was not only from the line of Jesse but also the line of Nitzevet, David's mother.

"King" is a category of male sovereignty that exercises political and military power over others.

Absent from the list are names of God like ""She Who Is the author of life".

Or "El-Shaddai" which best translates as "the God of Breasts". Even "Torah" itself is feminine in Hebrew.

And what about the mixed metaphor, "Av Harachamim" which is often translated Father of

Mercy, but actually translates, Wombed Father.

I like She Who Is, whose almighty power of compassion made the earth shake and the heavens pour down.

Research teaches us that when we believe in a male God, he is perceived as only transcendent — up there, out there, detached from the human condition. This concept thrives when we silence the more feminine idea of God's intimate presence in our lives.

Maleness and femaleness and nonbinary gender identities are all intrinsically beautiful, and designed to be interdependent.

Old-fashioned toxic masculinity distances us from vulnerability and healthy interdependence. Toxic masculine ideas conceive of a God who dominates and despises vulnerability. This is not a God with us, but a God not with us.

How do our stories about God change when we think of God as mother?

Isn't it finally time to see God as they, neither male nor female, but gloriously non-binary?

In order to come closer to who God is, and to see who we are, we must use words that include as much of the human experience as possible.

We must remember that any of our names for our God, including Allah and Great Spirit are metaphors, and God is contained by none.

On a personal level, I remember being a little girl in my family home playing with the Christmas creche. It was only out at Christmas, which made it very special. My mother was never precious about how well it faired in our little hands and each year there would be new chips and missing parts!

I loved to re-tell the story with the figures, and added to it by placing animals, with Jesus in the manger, like my little pony, and bringing in other visitors from my toys, two wise men accompanied by a troll. It was more natural to bond with the vulnerability of the Christ child and his parents in the Christmas story than the vulnerable man on the cross. Connecting with vulnerability makes it possible to feel our closeness to God.

Rather than making us fearful, it places us in a sacred space where our closeness in Spirit is our source of peace, and yes, joy.

The gentleness and peace I experienced with the baby Jesus and his mother, was at odds with the byline that Jesus came to die for my sins so that an angry God could be appeased. I also realize now that those figures in the creche were lily white. It never even occurred to me that I was taking into my childhood hands a narrative that Jesus was white and a Christian, and that God was male!

We see the effects today of that idolatrous story of God looking American aligned with whiteness, patriarchy, and cis gendered people.

God save us, and She will!

Jesus was not white and he most likely looked like a modern-day Arabic person. The earliest known image of Jesus is a lovely Egyptian Coptic Fresco that depicts Jesus as a Black man surrounded by Black and brown people. It was white people who invented the white Christ and it is one of white supremacy's most powerful myths.

What if the good news for us this Christmas Eve resides in imaging God as a Black Woman? I know we don't see this image in our windows, or in my childhood creche, but with God's help, we can see her and feel her, with the eyes of our souls. We can see her in the Black women in our midst.

Nothing in our lives is more consequential than the notion of God we hold.

To me, this is where the story of Jesus' birth just blows my mind.

The good news of this night—and my friends it is great news—is that God loves things by being in all things.

God loved us by becoming one of us.

God's answer to violence and domination was to become a tiny baby—born of a woman.

Baby at the breast, totally dependent on the love around him for survival.

God loves vulnerability.

God loves our vulnerability, and meets us with tenderness and proximity in that sacred space of oneness.

There is no separation from God, no division.

If we can really get ahold of that, we will be renewed and refreshed moving into the new year.

Jesus entered into his world of change and the risk of being torn and broken, just as we do.

He lived through the terrible twos and struggled with his parents and who he was.

He endured occupation, migrancy, and racism; and he had his own ethnic biases to undo.

He dwelt in the tender love of the God of Breasts and the wombed Father of Mercy.

Jesus depended on love and the God who named him, **beloved**.

We are all beloved.

God knows our endless struggle with our worthiness to be loved, and the harm we do to ourselves and others when we feel unworthy and separate from God and each other.

But God never loses sight of God within us, our unshakable goodness—even when we deny it in ourselves.

Jesus did not come to change God's mind about us, but to change our stories about God.

We were made in love, for love, and unto love.

Teresa of Avila told us her life changed when God spoke two words to her: Enjoy me.

The wonder of this blessed night is that God Emmanuel, is closer to us than we can imagine, and sometimes, closer than we can tolerate.

God does not abide by individualism or the concept of self-made people.

She sees past our insistence on self-reliance to who we really are—creatures longing to be loved all of our lives.

When we are closest to ourselves, we know this longing.

And as it turns out, the Tender one for whom we long, longs for us.

May we feel that presence tonight as we hold our loved ones, near and far, close, in Spirit.

Amen.