

And the Word Became Flesh: Christmas Words of Wisdom from Three Wise Women
Christmas Day, December 25, 2022, 10:00 p.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

And the Word became flesh ... the scriptures tell us.
And a weary world rejoices ... the hymn sings to us.

Familiar words
Comforting words
Christmas words
Words we've sung, said, and heard
(many of us)
for as long as we can remember ...
maybe even *before* we can remember.

And so,
on this Christmas Day in the morning,
it is the very familiarity
of these familiar words
that can become their challenge.

It is the challenge to hear them ...
to actually **hear** them ...
on this Christmas morning
as words not just describing a once upon a time
long, long ago moment to us –
but as words that are for us –
words that are about us
in this time, in this place, in this moment.

And so on this Christmas day in the morning,
I want to add to the words we've heard
from our beloved ancient texts
some words from those I've come to think of
as the Three Wise Women of Christmas:
Madeline, Marilyn, and Rachel ...
words that help lead us to claim the power
to **be** the change we want to see in the world
still struggling to become the Beloved Community
God created it to be.

For as we gather this Christmas day in the morning

the world we live in is too weary,
the challenges we face are too great
and the opportunities we have are too enormous
for us to claim **anything less** this Christmas Day
than the full promise of what we gather to celebrate
with our prayers and our praises,
our hymns and our hopes,
our carols and our candles.

And what we welcome this morning
is nothing less than the promise of new life
in the birth of this Christmas baby.

We are called to wonder again
at the power of a love
great enough to triumph over death
as we claim a Christmas Truth
greater than any of the traditions it inspires:
the mystical longing
of the creature for the creator –
the finite for the infinite –
the human for the divine.

It is a longing that transcends
culture, religion, language and custom –
and it is a longing that is represented for us as Christians
in this Christmas baby
all wrapped up in swaddling clothes
and lying in a manger.

The sudden, amazing, and incomprehensible gift of grace:
a God who loved us enough
to become one of us
in order to show us
how to love one another.

Loved us enough to become human
in order to show us how to become fully human.

Loved us enough to yearn for us
to become the creatures we were created to be
rather than settle for being
the creatures we had become.

And the Word became flesh.

All the traditions we inherit
all the rituals we practice
all the customs we claim
are designed to point us to that truth.

As sacramental people
they are for us
*"outward and visible signs
of the inward and spiritual grace"*
of God's love come down at Christmas.

Poet, author, and life-long Episcopalian – and our first Wise Woman **Madeline L'Engle** -- offers these words of reflection on that great mystery of the Word made flesh we gather to celebrate this morning in her poem "The First Coming:"

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

And the Word became Flesh

not because the world was sane or anymore ready for it
in first century Palestine than it is in 21st century Pasadena
where we struggle to make meaning
out of the violence, polarization and fears that surround us
in our beautiful and broken world.

And no one better to help with that "make meaning" part than theologian and Wise Woman **Marilyn McCord Adams** of blessed memory who reminds us:

*"God not only creates;
God resurrects.
God makes the worst count for good
by bringing life out of death.*

*To be on God's side,
we must bend ourself
to efforts that foster life,*

*inclusive community,
and creativity.*

*Collaboration revives hope
because it convinces us:
**we are safe because,
and only because,
we are loved by God!"***

No matter what, we are safe because we are loved by God.
And that, beloved, is the essence of the Word made flesh
we celebrate this Christmas morning in
the amazing gift of our brother Jesus born of our sister Mary.

Which it brings me to the third of our Wise Women – **Rachel Held Evans** – who offered these
wise words centering Mary in the miracle of the Word made flesh:

*God trusted God's very self,
totally, and completely and in full bodily form,
to the care of a woman.
God needed women for survival.
Before Jesus fed us with the bread and the wine,
the body and the blood,
Jesus himself needed to be fed, by a woman.
He needed a woman to say:
"This is my body, given for you." ...*

*To understand Mary's humanity
and her central role in Jesus's story
is to remind ourselves of the true miracle of the Incarnation—
and that is the core Christian conviction that God is with us,
plain old ordinary us.*

*God is with us in our fears and in our pain,
in our morning sickness and in our ear infections,
in our refugee crises and in our endurance of Empire,
in smelly barns and unimpressive backwater towns,
in the labor pains of a new mother
and in the cries of a tiny infant.
In all these things,
God is with us—and God is for us.*

God is for us ...
and made present among us

in the Word made flesh
in order to convince us
that we are safe
because we are loved by God.

And it is out of that safety –
out of the sure and certain knowledge
that absolutely nothing
can separate us from that love –
that we can risk –
we can dare.

We can be the change we want to see in the world
that is crying for change:
for hope, for light and for joy.

It is out of that safety
that we can risk trying again:
countering the powers and principalities
of violence, discrimination, and fear
with love, justice, and compassion.

It is out of that safety
that we can allow the promise of being fully alive
outweigh the fear of loss and vulnerability.

And it is out that safety that can we dare to claim
what Howard Thurman calls “The Work of Christmas:”

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:*

*To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace to all,
To make music in the heart.*

And so on this Christmas Day in the morning

I pray that you can hear the familiar words of Christmas
not as once-upon-a-time long-long-ago words
but as **words that are for you**
words that are **to you**
words that are **about you**
in this time, in this place, in this moment.

And I pray that the words of the Three Wise Women
will continue to lead us all forward into God's future
as we align ourselves with the grain of the universe --
the love that came down at Christmas as the Word made flesh.

Because my brothers & sisters & gender fluid siblings,
the world we live in is too weary,
the challenges we face are too great
and the opportunities we have are too enormous
for us to claim anything less this Christmas Day
than OUR call – each and every one of us –
to become the word made flesh
as the Body of Christ
sent out to do the work of Christmas.

*We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell.
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*

Merry Christmas. Amen.

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Madeline L'Engle:

The Ordering of Love (Writers' Palette Book) (p. 343). Published in her collection *A Cry Like a Bell* (1987).

Marilyn McCord Adams:

<https://theadvocatechurch.org/ghastly-interruptions-the-slaughter-of-the-innocents-a-sermon-by-the-rev-marilyn-mccord-adams/>

Rachel Held Evans:

Rachel Held Evans with Jeff Chu, *Wholehearted Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2021),
3–5, 6.