

December 24, 2020 Christmas Eve
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-20, with a strong nod to John 1

[Christian Century, December 16, 2020, Living by the World, page 22, by Heidi Haverkamp]

Grace, pure grace, to you this holy night. Amen.

Let me say first, I miss you.

This sanctuary is strangely quiet and nearly empty tonight.

Don't get me wrong, it's beautiful: the candles are flickering, the tree is lit.

Maybe you can see the silhouettes of the stained glass windows as the evening comes.

And, yes, it feels holy, it feels sacred.

I don't take lightly the privilege of savoring this holy night in this space, your space.

And yet, it doesn't feel right without you here, all of you.

I miss the hubbub: the energy as friends and family reconnect, as people come in out of the cold.

I miss noticing those I don't know, who find this space, this community filled with longing,

often longing we can't articulate, a yearning, a curiosity,

a grief, filled with memories: tender and raw and sweet memories.

I miss the intensity, the kids amped up on treats, barely able to contain themselves,

the tired parents, barely able to keep it together, and yet here.

There is a grief this season and I name it because it's real.

We're traversing decisions and family conversations about if and how to meet,

and how to keep one another safe.

We're making-do with some of the traditions, a few of the routines, but certainly not all.

Some days we can handle this, roll with it, maybe even enjoy breaking new ground.

Many days it's just hard and it's easy to get cranky or down,

missing our ways when we don't even realize what we're missing, tired of the hamster wheel.

It's grief, friends, grief: lots of grief.

Grief that's very personal and private,

and grief, uncertainty, anger that's big and communal:

Why are we in this predicament?

Why so many losses, so much needless pain?

And, the violence and injustice of this year, this need for racial reckoning...why does it take so long to begin to hear and honor beloved voices, sacred lives? Grief.

Tonight's nativity story is well worn and so familiar: with a sleeping baby and doting parents, heavenly hosts and shepherds in the field.

It's easy to miss the grief and uncertainty in that story, both Luke's rendition and Matthew's.

No room in the inn: How terrifying for this young couple?

An enormously powerful emperor with a shadow looming long, a heavy fist, a thumb on the lives...of everyone.

Herod's threats, the massacre of the Holy Innocents, Jesus' family's desperate escape to Egypt: this is the stuff of trauma, of grief.

Many years we can smooth over these parts of the story, but this year, they compel me.

Episcopal priest and writer, Heidi Haverkamp, reflects how she finds the reality of Jesus' nativity stories heartening—"Because," she writes, "**I need even more to know that Jesus is with us,** that these sorts of events are not shocking to God" even in a year when so much that had seemed unbreakable has broken.

I need to know that Jesus is with us.

These last few days I've been musing about the nativity story,

Why does it matter?

What is its meaning?...not some scholar's meaning, but its meaning for you, for me.

I'm not asking this out of some existential crisis, but rather a longing in this season to remember what is important, what matters.

Grief and stress, unfamiliar routines, these can disconnect us from ourselves and from God.

In daring to ask that question, I'm pushing myself and you to reconnect: **What is the meaning for you?**

Heidi Haverkamp's comments ring true for me:

I need to know that Jesus is with us.

That's why Christmas is important to me, especially this year.

I need to know that God isn't unfamiliar with the politics of this time, or the anxieties we face, or the weighty grief, or systemic injustice.

Jesus and his family knew all of this, and then some...

These last weeks when I've been around church and some of you have stopped by, it's been wonderful to see you.

We snug up our masks and keep our distance and extend an air hug.

Most often we say something like, “It’s so good to see you in the flesh,” as in,
we’ve seen a lot of one another on computer screens or talked across telephone lines,
and it feels good to see one another for real—In the flesh.

This Christmas night, again, God is born in the flesh, in human skin.

Oh do we need that reminder that Jesus is with us, in the flesh.

That’s the good news this holy night.

In the flesh: This isn’t how they expected their king to come, and yet he did.

In the flesh: Born a vulnerable baby, and powerful enough to turn the world around,
to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor.

In the flesh: A savior, freeing us from our sin,
so we can remember that we don’t need to be the savior, God is God.

In the flesh: Resilient, messy, healing, with the freedom to try again, to learn, to grow.

In the flesh: loving, and risking going deeper, trusting more fully, following more truly.

Tonight Jesus is born in the flesh to teach us how to **be** healing, to **be** hope, for one another and this beaten
and battered world.

These last weeks we here at University Lutheran Church of Hope have been praying especially for a friend
of our congregation named Mario and for his family.

In November Mario was picked up by ICE.

He faced a deportation order and the terror of COVID while separated from his family in detention, terrified
and uncertain.

We can only begin to imagine how hard it has been for his wife and kids, his parents and siblings, his
friends.

Two days ago we learned the good news that Mario’s request for asylum is being honored. Hallelujah.

This means he’ll be able to go home to his family, and continue the process of application for a special type
of visa.

Walking with Mario and his family through this nightmare has reminded me again:

Our God works in the flesh,
making a space in Mary,
born in a vulnerable baby,
good news of great joy shared voice to shaky voice,
welling up in tears of joy and tears of sorrow,

holding the hand of the sick, the dying,
reaching out across the divide,
embodying hope,
sharing resilience.

Our God works in the flesh—Jesus flesh, and your flesh and my flesh.

On Tuesday, soon after we'd heard about Mario's asylum, I came into this dark sanctuary.

Some of you had visited that day and the candles were burning, the tree was lit, Zach was playing the organ, preparing for this very service.

I came in and I wept—

I cried in joy for Mario and his family, and in sadness that they ever have to face this terror.

I cried for you and me, for the heartbreak and grief and stress that we carry, and the hope that we embody.

I cried for our world and our cities, resilient and yet battered.

Living on our screens, wearing masks, it's a little too easy to forget those tears, that grief,

but tonight Jesus is born again in the flesh, tears and all, and it matters.

The angels and shepherds, they knew it mattered, they showed up.

And we know it matters, too, showing up in our own safe ways, it matters.

Tonight beloved, God is born again...in the flesh.

Born at last to mend our breaking hearts.

Thanks be to God this holy night. Amen.