

December 24, 2021 Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-20

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[Ideas from Sermon Brainwave Podcast posted on 12-18-21 for this date. Strong's Greek #4820.]

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

Would you take a breath, a deep breath? (pause)

It's taken a bit to get to this place tonight, hasn't it?

And I don't mean just this physical space if you are here in the sanctuary.

I mean this emotional space, this logistical space, and that includes everyone:

those on Zoom,

those using YouTube,

those I'm seeing face to face.

Christmas Eve can be complicated, intense... and this year feels more so than ever.

There's the amped up energy of kids and presents.

There's the anticipation having missed so much last year.

And the tender grief of missing loved ones—so much loss.

There's the juggling of commitments, and finally letting down and savoring the time,
even for a moment.

There's a lot coming at us.

There's the years of COVID:

the Omicron spike and the tremendous uncertainty that comes with decisions—
to gather or not, and how?

making the best decisions for ourselves, and for our community,
and sometimes (often) those decisions aren't the same as what
your neighbors or family or friends might make.

There's the information overload and the weariness in *having* to make decisions.

Can I get an Amen?!

And the news is heavy.

Listening yesterday to the outcome of the trial of former Officer Kimberly Potter,
just elevates these challenging times,

full of devastating mistakes, and consequences, for everyone.

There's a lot coming at us.

Take a breath, a deep breath. (pause)

To you, to me, to us, this holy night: Grace, pure grace.

We know this nativity story well, don't we?

the journey to Bethlehem,
the sleeping baby and the doting parents,
the heavenly hosts and shepherds in the field.

Near the end, in a seemingly quiet moment,

after the shepherds have arrived and begun to explain what they experienced in the holy darkness
on that hillside, Luke tells us:

"Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

Mary pondered them.

Sometimes this verb Ponder can seem a little passive.

I imagine Mary, in her Olin Mills best, quietly considering it all.

Friends, I think there's a little more going on here:

The word Luke uses, the word that we hear in English as Ponder, in Greek that word is *Sumballo*:

Ballo means throw, and *Sum* means with, or together.

So there's this sense of all these things being *thrown together*.

I can imagine Mary's mind racing over the last months, and all that has been thrown at her:

Gabriel's unexpected visit.

Joseph.

The time away with her elder cousin Elizabeth.

Mary's fierce and humble song of resistance, a song of hope and trust, the scales (finally) tipped to justice.

I can imagine news of the census.

The politics and powers of the time.

The stress of travel, crossing borders and boundaries.

The city, filled to capacity and then some.

I can imagine the uncertainty and desperation in Joseph's voice.

The baby Jesus coming.

The exhaustion and relief.

That verb, to Ponder, to throw together, reminds us that Mary is holding all of this in her heart that night.

She's not passively having a moment,

but rather actively holding onto all that is being thrown at her.

Heaven and earth have come close, indeed, they have touched.

And Mary holds all of this.

Tonight, dear ones, Jesus is born.

God is born in human flesh.

Salvation takes mortal shape.

Forgiveness cries out.

Hope breathes.

Tonight angels sing, and the shepherds dare to follow.

Tonight, this holy night, God is born,

and Mary, in her amazing, intersectional way, holds all that is thrown together.

When heaven and earth come close,

when holy darkness and holy light linger,

when the "hopes and fears of all the years" meet,

when so much is being thrown together,

this, beloved ones, is rich, sacred space and birth happens here, right here.

Last Sunday our community was blessed by a lovely Lessons and Carols service.

The music was beautiful and fun.

The kids and youth, in particular, took leadership.

Their voices were strong and clear.

One of the parents emailed afterward, marveling at how their child just this fall began to read.

As they were practicing for the service the child commented,

"Church is all about how if you mess up, it's all right."

Friends, when heaven and earth come close, when hope is born,

there's so much being thrown together,

so much coming at us.

So much to learn and practice.

We're practicing following Jesus and loving our neighbors:

those with whom we agree, and those whose world view we diametrically oppose.
We're practicing loving each other as *others* want to be loved.

Sometimes we do this well, other days we mess up.
Our children are often more okay with this grace than we adults are.
In a wonderfully refreshing way, my youngest reminds me: Practice makes progress.

As a congregation we're practicing making the dramatic changes needed for our climate.

If you are here in person tonight,

you may have noticed the big steel pillars rising in the center of the parking lot.

Yes, the ones decked out for the seasons with big red bows☺

Those pillars are the the frame on which solar panels will soon rest.

These panels—and the others already on the roof—will do their magical work
of converting the sun's rays to energy—energy enough to power our building.

Like Mary, there's a lot coming at us.

A few weeks ago I was writing a quick email to my sister-in-law who lives in New Hampshire:

something about favorite colors, young adult novels, rock bands
and Christmas gift ideas for the cousins.

I briefly commented how much we're looking forward to seeing them for some days after Christmas.

And then I had a moment which I choose to add to the email as a big parenthetical.

This is what I said: "Sheesh, I write this and get all weepy, the kids growing up,.....,

how terribly hard this fall and these years have been...

I guess I'm missing you guys more than I knew."

I don't think I'm alone in moments like that,

in the challenges of these days,

in the missing of those we love.

There's a lot coming at Mary, at you and me, at our kids, at all of us.

Take a breath, a deep breath... Grace, pure grace.

On this holy night, when heaven and earth come close:

may God's embrace be strong,

may grace be your guide in the practice,

and may Love find you, and keep you. Always. Amen.