

December 24, 2023 Christmas Eve

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis

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

John 1:1a, 14a

Denise Levertov poem: [On the Mystery of the Incarnation](#)

[Church of the Wild, by Victoria Loorz, ideas and quotes from chapter 6. How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen, by David Brooks, page 12.]

The peace and love of the Christ Child,

the harmony of the angels,
the wonder of the shepherds
be with you, dwell with you, this holy night. Amen.

We've made it! Whether online or in person: We are here.

I love Christmas Eve: the music, the candles,
the community that gathers for the age-old telling,
the honest, messy beauty of God in flesh,
coming to live among us, as a baby, born here, again, this night.

I love Christmas Eve, and I know the intensity of nights like this, for they are ... Full.

Full of hopes and expectations, our own, and other people's, often unspoken.
Full of memories, for many of us the ache of grief rests close, the holidays are tender, precious times.
Full of excited kids and weary parents, doing our best to keep it together. Can I get an Amen?

While some in our community are feeling the pressure of obligations and overwhelm,

others are feeling the twinge of loneliness—these days can be so quiet.
Even this year, plenty are navigating sickness and it's uncertainty, and some are travelling.
And wars rage, that's wars plural, turmoil in many lands, division in our own,
and the earth groans,
Take a breath, a deep breath: we are here, this holy night, we are here, God is here. [PAUSE]

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus."

That is the beginning of the age-old nativity story, the one that is familiar to most of us.
We read it just minutes ago, from Luke's gospel.
This is the stuff of Christmas pageants and nativity sets.
Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus.
The angels, and shepherds and their sheep on the hillside.

There's another Christmas story that we read less often,

a passage about which there are less Carols, but it's familiar in its own right..
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God..."
"And the Word became flesh and lived among us."
This is from the start of John's gospel, a passage most often read on Christmas morning.
But this evening, it's these beautiful lines from John that we've woven through, laced through, Luke's telling.

Now, I love how this holy night God takes on human form, born a baby in Bethlehem,

vulnerable to the varieties of life with skin.
But tonight it's Conversation I invite us to focus on.
That's why we intertwined the gospel readings: to set them in conversation.
John's telling and Luke's telling, your voices and my voice.
I've been intrigued this year to learn that what we read as the noun Word, "In the beginning was the Word",
can also be translated as Conversation, spirited, dynamic and active conversation
In fact, in the first three centuries after Jesus lived, this passage was always translated as Conversation.

Instead of, “In the beginning was the Word,” as is familiar to many of us, it sounded like this:
“In the beginning was the Conversation.

And the Conversation was with God, and the Conversation was God...

And the Conversation became flesh and lived among us...”

[Pause] The Conversation became flesh and lived among us.

Friends, Conversation changes things!

Victoria Loorz writes in her book *Church of the Wild*,

“This suggests that God *is* the dynamic intimacy of relationship,
a verb of back-and-forth, of connection,

of Love that created everything and connects everything and moves everything forward.”

The wind dancing through the trees.

The stars singing in the night. A holy conversation.

The heavens come close with angel voices.

The good news of the shepherds and the intimate knowing of the sheep. Holy conversation.

The trusting, tired gaze of Mary and Joseph, the murmur of comfort.

The Conversation became flesh and lived among us.

Tonight, dear ones, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus,

I invite you to imagine what it means that our God, this one who IS holy conversation,
joins not only humanity, but all creation,
in this profoundly intimate and active and relational way.

Three blessings of Conversation... The first is Courage:

Now conversation is risky, it's vulnerable.

What if in our conversation, you realize my weakness? Or my power?

What if conversation inspires honesty that's too honest? Or anger that flares?

But when our God IS Conversation,

then the “Conversation holds all things together,” as Victoria Loorz explains,
“from the cosmos to nations to ecosystems to your very own psyche.”

There's a freedom here, and a bundle of courage.

Instead of being wary to venture into conversations about hard things,

say the war in Israel and Gaza,,

where rhetoric feels impossibly fraught

we can trust that God is present already in the conversation,

that God IS the conversation, and with God there's a way through, a way forward.

Instead of simply fearing for the world, we have the courage to dream of a new world that is
more just, more authentic, more loving.

With the courage of conversation we can learn about race and about land, about power and privilege,
we can check our assumptions.

With courage, we can be open to learning something new.

The second blessing is Empathy:

I was gifted this week with writer and commentator David Brooks' new book.

It's called *How to Know a Person: The art of seeing others deeply and being deeply seen*.

Now Brooks engages diplomats and scholars, talk show hosts and folks on the street.

But he also writes about his discomfort at dinner parties, and *his* struggle to be part of the conversation.

He writes, “To survive, pluralistic societies require citizens who can look across difference
and show the kind of understanding that is a prerequisite of trust

—who can say, at the very least, ‘I’m beginning to see you.

Certainly, I will never fully experience the world as you experience it,
but I'm beginning, a bit, to see the world through your eyes." Empathy.

The third blessing of Conversation is Grace:

One of the therapists who is part of our family's village reminds us: Connect, then correct.
My instinct might be to correct that behavior, and, yes, we'll get to that.

But before that, start first with Connection.

Start first with the God's grace that is bestowed on you and me and all creation,
With the grace of connection, of relationship, there's the freedom
to be embodied and real, not perfect, but deeply loved, beloved.

Courage. Empathy. Grace.

Last week, some from Hope spent part of Sunday afternoon Christmas Caroling.

We visited a number of our members who aren't easily able to get to church.

Around the front stoop, and in care centers, and in living rooms we sang some of the favorites.

What a treat to be together with these dear ones.

At one home long time Hope members Donna and Jeanne were waiting for us.

These two are in their 90s and have been friends and neighbors for more than half a century—
that's a lot of conversations!

In our stocking feet, we padded into the living room to sing and bring the greetings of the congregation.

And then as we were about to go,

Donna recognized and pulled over one in our chorus who she's known for many years.

As we listened in,

she thanked him for a kindness some 30 years ago during a time of great sadness in her family.

Then she asked about his family, for she remembered that not so many years back they'd feared for health.

There was a sweetness in this little overheard conversation, and I was moved to tears:

Alden bending over to lean in close,

Donna's grip on his hand,

the depth of emotion recalled—such hard times for each family,

experiences that spanned decades and shape them still today.

"And the Conversation became flesh and lived among us."

On this holy night, Jesus is born into the welcome of the whole creation.

There is a mutuality and solidarity, a Conversation: Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus,

the angel song spread wide, with space-enough for the mystery of this night,

the shepherds and their flocks, daring to tell the good news.

God's embrace, inviting us into the conversation, however we show up.

The Conversation became flesh and lives among us still. Thanks be to God. Amen