“A Messy Birth”

by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Christmas Eve 2019

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

Tonight, we heard again the story of God’s entrance into a challenging situation.

Mary and Joseph’s life together is complicated…there is reason, at least from the outside looking in, to wonder why in the world they are still together…pregnant out of wedlock…on a long journey potentially just days away from birth…no plans made to stay anywhere, perhaps because there were no resources to pay for it. In Christmas seasons past, being part of my own messy family, I have been immensely comforted by the fact that God incarnate chose the context of a messy family in a messy circumstance in which to enter the world.

But this year, for whatever reason, I see a different truth in the pieces of the Christmas story. At least as we hear the biblical story, God didn’t choose a messy family in a messy circumstance in which to enter the world…God’s choice to enter the world through that family MADE them and their circumstances messy! Until the angel Gabriel visited Mary to announce her pregnancy with Jesus, she and Joseph were betrothed and all was seemingly going along swimmingly. Had she not become pregnant, she and Joseph could have likely made the travel to Bethlehem more quickly, camped under the stars with relative ease if need be, registered and turned right back. But, boom! God incarnate—God WITH US—enters their family and the challenges begin to add up.

From this new vantage point, this doesn’t seem the heartwarming picture of Jesus’ birth that all of the Christmas songs make it out to be. This seems like challenging circumstances *because* of the very presence of God incarnate in them.

Given my entry into the Christmas Story this year from the perspective of families, it is no surprise that my new revelations have been in conversation with my own experiences of family.

As I have said to many of you before, even preached before, my family has had its own messiness. The defining family mess for me has always been my parents’ divorce during my 8th grade year. This is the “before” and “after” event of my life—the first significant, acute experience of things never being the same again.

I have tended to think of my parents’ divorce as an event that God came to after it happened, and then led us all out of. But in my new hearing of the Christmas Story this year, I think it may very well have been my first significant experience of the birth of Christ in my life. God incarnate came into my family, and because of that, things got turned right on their heads.

Certainly not at all to say that every challenging circumstance, every divorce, every loss, whatever messy challenge it may be, represents the birth of God incarnate. Some things are just really hard things that God joins us in and leads us out of. But, sometimes, as in the case of the particular divorce that my family experienced, the hard circumstance is occasioned by God’s desires for our collective freedom, joy, and wholeness.

It was my Dad’s decision to part ways with my mom. He wasn’t fulfilled—not just that he wasn’t happy, but that he wasn’t able to be himself…there were whole parts of him that were stifled in the context of their marriage. And, if there were whole parts of him that were stifled, then there were also whole parts of my mother and each of us children that were stifled. Whether we realized it or not, all of us were bound in the pain and yearning of their marriage.

And so, on that September evening in 1988, Christmas came to my family. Jesus, eventual liberator and unconditional lover, was born in my father’s decision to pack his overnight bag and leave the house.

I know, this sermon seems nothing like what a Christmas Eve sermon should be. Except, it is… The Good News—The Gospel—is coming. Because, although things got really messy for my family, they did so in order to bring freedom, fullness and abundantly gentle love.

In the years following my parents’ divorce, not only my father, but my mother, and each of us children, were invited step by step to claim more fully the lives to which God had always been calling us. What we each learned about grief and joy, boundedness and freedom, and pretense and authenticity have propelled us to more authentic versions of ourselves and the joy of loving one another *as we are, not how we wish each other was*.

This has not been easy. The truth of the presence of fear, of regret, of longing, even of debilitating mental illness was revealed once my Dad was freed from the role of holding and tending all of that. The day Jesus was born in the midst of our family revealed everything in us that needed both redeeming, and the nourishment of radical, unconditional love.

Although in my family it was my father who gave birth to God’s process for wholeness and radical love, just as the shepherds were promised, Jesus’ birth really was Good News for *all* of us. Each one of us was ultimately liberated into richer, more loving lives, lives committed to resolving our divine longings for wholeness and joy.

Among many other things, my parents’ divorce liberated my mother’s identity as someone suffering with mental illness, something she and my dad had been sheltering us from…although messy to begin to see this most precious of vulnerabilities in her, the birth of Christ invited us all to experience richly the gift of radical empathy that she, like many living with mental illness, are empowered to share.

Among other things, my parents’ divorce liberated my father’s love of music…He is now devoting most of his free time to playing jazz, something he did with his parents as a boy, but a musical genre my mother never warmed up to. When he is playing jazz, he is alive with joy.

Among other things, my parents’ divorce liberated my siblings and I into the deepest friendship I will likely ever have! We still talk to each other every day…and always, even when one of us is in the midst of the hardest of circumstances, eventually laugh our divine, cathartic laughter!

Take heart….For me, this year, the wisdom of the messy little family in the manger in Bethlehem is *not*, Get Divorced! Rather, it is that our yearnings to be more ourselves and to open ourselves to new life are not sentimental, or unimportant, or selfishly destructive. They likely hold the power to unleash God’s courageous, freeing presence for ourselves, for those in our lives, for our whole, battered creation.

All of us have examples from our lives, either individually or collectively, of the birth of Christ. Things are going along fairly smoothly for *us*, anyway, and a yearning for freedom, wholeness or authenticity is incarnated somewhere in our lives.

We’ve all at least been teenagers…Most of us going along in a fairly easy, mutually fulfilling relationship with our parents, and then Boom! Jesus is born in our yearning for independent, authentic selves. Things get messy for awhile, but ultimately, for a lot of us, we and our parents are liberated into rich new relationships with one another and the wild ride of adulthood.

We can each likely identify other examples of Jesus’ birth—the incarnation of God’s longing for freedom and wholeness--in our lives, or in the lives of those around us. The coming out of those who are queer. The honest facing of an addiction. The painful, wrenching quest for racial justice. The reclaiming of space and resources by God’s stunning creation.

God’s liberation doesn’t come without messiness. But, it does come, and when it does, it is, indeed, Good News.

It is Christmas Eve…The Eve of the incarnation of God, here, in the life of the world…our world…do you hear the first cries of God’s birth?