*Reflecting our Astonishing Light: A Sermon for Christmas Eve*

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*“The shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us Go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place.’” Luke 2:15*

This Advent, I have been listening to a marvelous contemplative scripture podcast …the host has a warm, gentle voice, and she tells each day’s story slowly, pausing throughout to wonder about various characters in the story…what they might be feeling, or what their motivations might be.

So, when I began my preparation for this homily, it was with wonder that I met our shepherds… our shepherds, on the margins of their community as shepherds were in those days…thought by many to be untrustworthy, shifty…they moved around a lot… sheep need fresh fields to graze, but that reality seemed lost on those around our shepherds. They were visited by an angel…and reacted with fear—not much to wonder about there…if an angel were to come among us right now, I’d probably be scared myself. The angel told them that a King had been born nearby and that this was joyful, good news for them and for all—so, they went. And they didn’t meander…they went quickly! With haste! I imagine them frantically gathering their sheep and then running…herding the sheep as they went…scrambling as sheep got underfoot and as they crashed into one another in the dark…and then they arrived…breathless, curious, excited…nervous? And what did they see?

What did the shepherds see…what did they see that did, indeed, fill them with joy….move them to praise God…to rush off with sheep in tow to tell others?

I wish I could have been there, to witness the looks on their faces…the reaction of their postures…the sounds of their breathing.

What did the shepherds see…?

Well, of course, we can’t know exactly what they saw, but from the story, at least, it appears that they saw a family resting in a stable. Parents who looked like their parents…a baby who looked like their babies…even sleeping like the shepherds did, amidst grazing animals.

As I’ve been wondering all week what they saw, it has occurred to me that they probably saw a version of themselves.

But, if that was all they saw, would they have left running and shouting out to the world?…if they just saw folks who were like them, on the margins, forced to give birth in a dirty stable, wouldn’t they have thought either the angels were crazy, or *they*, *themselves*, were crazy, and then left quietly…disappointed? They must have seen something else then, mustn’t they…or at least something *more*?

As I was wondering this one morning, my favorite quote from the great Sufi mystic Hafiz popped into my head: “*I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being.”…*And something in me sparked. Perhaps what the shepherds saw as they gazed at the Holy Family…that Holy Child sleeping with the animals, was themselves, but not as unworthy vagrants…instead, they saw themselves shining with divinity… sacred… holy… of God. Perhaps what they saw was the astonishing light of their own being.

Perhaps the Incarnation—God coming into the world as a tiny, vulnerable human born without fanfare amidst some smelly animals to a very young mother—is not to hold up some unblemished, perfect humanity as a goal to which we should aspire, but instead, to reveal that the humanity that is already… is, itself, holy.

Perhaps Emmanuel—God with us—*Jesus*, was simply endowed by God with an immense and *singular* ability to reveal the brilliance of God’s presence within himself…Perhaps baby Jesus sleeping amidst the animals in that manger reveals that we, even in our limitations, even in our inexperience, even when we are excluded and unseen, even when we must rely completely on others, are holy beings in which God dwells and in and by whom God. Can*.* Act. That humanity, in all its imperfections and vulnerabilities is both beautiful and powerful—so much so that even God desired to be clothed in it.

As the Rev. Mary Luti has written of this understanding of the Incarnation:

*“God accepts limits to dissolve the limits that made it seem as if God and humans were opposites. The great wonder of the Incarnation is that we’re not.*

*If you believe this, then what you’re waiting for in Advent is not someone to fix us but someone to reveal us to ourselves. The gift on the horizon is not a moral course correction but a bright mirror, a gaze, a joyous shock of mutual recognition—look, there, the eternal resemblance, the beauty, the dignity, the nearness, the ever-shining love.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Hmmm…Jesus not as a “moral course correction,” but as a mirror revealing to us our own resemblance to God…our own divinely-given dignity…

This all feels true to me… However, if this really is an authentically true understanding of the incarnation, then Jesus as a mirror of our Godly resemblance, in itself, must begin Jesus’ work of liberation, of salvation. So, my wondering turns again…can a mirror like this, which affirms our very humanity as holy, begin the work of ending oppression, and of freeing *all* of us into wholeness?

I say Yes! With every bone in my body, I believe it can. The divine affirmation of our personhood has the power to unlock parts of ourselves shame and fear have long hidden away. Look at the shepherds! For the shepherds, beholding the Holy Family…God revealed within a body and circumstances just like theirs….freed them to unbridled joy and to re-asserting their voices into their rightful place in their community—crowds ultimately gather around them to hear what they had experienced!

That sort of affirmation can free us, too…and boy do we need it. What would efforts for racial justice or climate preservation look like if we engaged those issues liberated from our shame and fear? Buoyed by the energy of unbridled joy?

What *did* the shepherds see? And I wonder, tonight… tomorrow…next week…next month…each time you arrive again to the presence of God here, now, what will *you* see?

Oh how I pray that you will see Jesus…and in seeing Jesus, the utterly astonishing light of *your* own being.

1. From Rev. Luti’s 12/3/21 UCC Daily Devotional Contribution accessed at: <https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/divinized/?inf_contact_key=155bf284a263d152f0aa3078e6e78cab7e470d92b8b75168d98a0b8cac0e9c09> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)