

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

Christmas 2015

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20.

Look Among the Straw and the Stars

What does Christmas tell us about God?

What does Christmas tell us about where to find God?

What does Christmas tell us about being found by God,
about who we are?

As we prepared for Christmas this past Sunday, we used these words for
the lighting of our Advent Wreath to describe how God comes to us:

“Not in mighty places of power, but in little Bethlehem, in a room out back.”

“Not born in nobility and wealth, but of Mary and Joseph, who pondered
and planed.”

“Nothing will be impossible for God, but when and where we least expect
it, look among the straw and the stars.”¹

Look among the straw and the stars.

These words engage my imagination---where is the straw?

What is the straw of my life, of your life, of our world?

And what does it mean that the stars speak to us of God, long ago in
Bethlehem and here and now?

¹ Kimberly Bracken Long, ed., *Feasting on the Word, Liturgies For Year C, Vol. 1, Advent Through Pentecost*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, p. 14..

“Nothing will be impossible for God, but when and where we least expect it, look among the straw and the stars.”

The shepherds were not expecting to meet the Savior, Emmanuel,
God-with-us, that night.

God shows up in our lives too, when we are thinking of other things, when
we least expect it.

Those words speak of the two aspects of God we celebrate tonight.

God is in the straw and God is in the stars.

God is in the every room out back and every humble beginning; God is
down to earth...this is the truth of Christmas.

This is so even as God is the Creator of the universe and the Savior of the
world.

These aspects of God are wrapped up together for us and given as gift,
the gift of Christmas.

God is always near us, as close as our breathe, and God is also much
more than we can understand.

The amazing gift of Christmas, God coming to dwell with us is what we
have come to celebrate tonight.

We come to celebrate the One who wants to know us and love us
intimately and forever, the One who wants this so much that God
become human and was born among us, as one of us.

...The nativity of Jesus; the incarnation of God...

What angels announced long ago and have announced
countless times and in countless ways since,
is still a mystery that
invites our wonder and our curiosity.

As with most things about faith and religion, I think wonder and curiosity are
to be more valued than having all the answers.

This is a night to wonder and to be curious about what Christmas means

for us.

Wonder and curiosity...isn't that what the shepherds had?

The shepherds said to each other, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place."

Every year we go again to Bethlehem, to see, to rejoice, to join with each other

and people all over the world who celebrate Christmas.

We go with hope and expectation.

As the story goes, the shepherds were first greeted by an angel who said, "Do not be afraid."

It is a fearful thing to have angels appear and speak--but they were there to bring good news, unbelievable news: after waiting and hoping for so long, on this day the Savior, the Messiah, the

Lord had come, come as a baby into our world.

The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But then they hear the invitation, and decide to go...go and check it out...why not...what do they have to lose...and what if it is true...well, they want to see for themselves, they want to see the baby.

God's invitation to us to come and see is always there; come and see among the straw and the stars...and at Christmas we hear the angel's whisper to us as we sing our great hymns of joy and pray together.

How do the hymns and the readings strike you this Christmas?

Do you hear something new or in a deeper way?

This may be God giving you a gift, a gift specifically for you.

Yes, the story is the same, but we are invited to receive it anew every year; we are different than we were last year, our world is different than it

was...Christ is born for us tonight right where we are in this time
and in this place, in this world, our world which gives us joy in many
ways but also worries us and can evoke fear in us.

Hear the angels say, "Do not be afraid."

We have been preparing to meet the baby Jesus again.

We have been preparing the manger of our hearts for Jesus.

What can we give Jesus?

We can give our hearts.

What is going on in your heart tonight?

All that is in your heart, all the gifts you offer and all the challenges you
face, your joy and your pain, your heart is the place where the baby
Jesus wants to rest...to be with you.

For this moment, for these circumstances, this is why Jesus was born.

To be the light of the world; to show us the way.

Lyrics to a hymn by Geoffrey Ainger speak of the
Christmas light in this way:

Born in the night, Mary's Child, a long way from your home;

Coming in need, Mary's Child, born in a borrowed room;

Clear shining light, Mary's Child, Your face lights up our way;

Light of the world, Mary's Child, dawn on our darkened day.

Truth of our life, Mary's Child, You tell us God is good;

Yes, it is true Mary's Child, dawn on our darkened day.²

The birth of Jesus shows us the truth of our life in many ways---shows us
how our lives and God's life are connected, which has implications
for every aspect of our lives.

Richard Rohr in his book, *What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways
To Your deeper Self*, describes as seeing,

² Quoted in, *Imaging the Word, An Arts and Lectionary Resource*, vol. 2, editor, Susan A. Blain, Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995, p. 101.

“all human personhood as a real and organic participation
in the one personhood that is God.”

Rohr goes on to say that, ... “we play our God’s image in myriad human
ways.”³

We express God in the world.

As much as we want to hold the baby Jesus; God came to us to show us
who we are by holding us through the life of Christ.

God needed us to know how much we are loved and how much we are
connected to God...how dramatically our lives are part of God’s life.

As Joan Chittister puts it: “the Creator has taken on the flesh and blood of
creation in order to bring us to assert the divine in ourselves.

In the Christmas story we see God become helpless, become like us,
become subject to the tensions of growth, become flesh so we
might have the confidence to recognize that we have the stuff it
takes to become like God.”⁴

God needs us to know that we have God’s strength and support to be for
God in the world.

All we need to do is watch the news to know how much God needs us to
be about peace and justice in this world.

God wanted us to know of God’s love and care and eternal connection,
God came to us as in vulnerability as a baby to live the fullness of the
human experience, so that we can live in the fullness of the
divine, forever.

Christmas is about eternity.

God took a big risk in being born a vulnerable baby, but it was worth it to
God....to know us and to help us know who we are, and to be there

³ Richard Rohr, *What The Mystics Know, Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self*, Epub., The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2015, Loc 526 of 2291

⁴ <http://us6.campaign-archive2.com/?u=0bcd62516ffe48a23a1231c56&id=16d60eee9b&e=3fbf1b7b04>

for us in straw as well as the stars.

I will conclude with these words from Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153).

Let us pray:

*You have come
to us as a small child,
but you have
brought us the greatest
of all gifts, the gift
of eternal love.
Caress us with your
tiny hands, embrace us
with your tiny arms,
and pierce our hearts with
your soft, sweet cries.⁵*

Amen.

⁵ Quoted in, *Imaging the Word, An Arts and Lectionary Resource*, vol. 2, editor, Susan A. Blain, Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995, p. 105.