

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • DECEMBER 24, 2018
CHRISTMAS EVE

Christmas Litany

John 1:1-5

*In the beginning was the Word,
**And the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.***

He was in the beginning with God.

***All things came into being through him,
without him not one thing came into being.***

What has come into being in him was life,

And the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness,

and the darkness did not overcome it.

The Scripture

Luke 2:1-11

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

The Message
Invasion of Love
Nick Larson

Dear God, let tonight be the beginning of our shining forth. Be born inside of us anew for the sake of your bright and broken world. Amen.

I was so inspired by Terry's invitation for offering yesterday, I went home and saw so many gifts just waiting to be given out. So much love sitting on my shelf or tucked away in a drawer not being enjoyed and not flourishing. So, I thought what better way to embody the Christmas spirit than by giving things away.

Because, what is Christmas without gifts?

Or, maybe you just have that person, where you are like, "I have no idea what to get them!" Maybe some of you are a little behind on the gifting front and can use this, and like Terry said yesterday, regifting, or wrapping up and giving away things you already had, is all good, because it all belongs to God anyway.

Okay, so this is how this is going work. I have wrapped a few things, and I would like to gift them to one of you.

Let's not call it regifting, let's call it "passing on the blessing." Or how about this? "Keeping goodness in circulation."

You may be thinking - wait... "Are you just regifting this to me?" No; I'm participating in the great generative flow of the universe...in which you receive and give.

Alright, so this is a good one here. It is one of my favorite books, *Take this Bread* by Sara Miles. In it, she is converted by a communion experience to literally feed the hungry in San Francisco from their communion table.

Anybody here...need a little sweetness to give to someone in your life?

Anybody here settling into a new apartment or house? At our staff Christmas party, I stole from my neighbor a set of kitchen towels that came with bonus oven mitts.

Anybody here love to de-stress by coloring? Cause here's a great book about coloring your way through Lent.

Anybody here need a new wonderful water bottle? I was given it for going over the edge to represent the \$5,000 MOM gave to Love, INC?

Anybody here need a jar full of love in the form of Hersey kisses?

Honestly, you did me a favor. You helped me create a lot of mental and even some physical space, while putting these things to good use.

Really, if you stop to think about it; my silly, little regifting illustration makes the point I hope you go home with today.

The point is this Christmas story, this story of Emmanuel, of God with us, is palpable. It is a full-on invasion of love into our world.

The Jesus story is about God coming to show us what God has been up to all along. That in the manger is the good news. That Jesus is real. And that hope is worth counting on. The story is fantastic, to the point that it actually acts within you and mysteriously, wondrously, transforms lives.

This story has not only survived for the past few thousand years, it has thrived. It has crossed oceans, it has been translated into thousands of languages. It has shaped and transformed individuals into servant leaders, created cultural movements for the common good, motivated discoveries, and lifted up the lowly.

Jesus Christ is the personhood of God, an invasion of the cosmic creative force of love.

It is tangible, it's right here in front of you in the seemingly-most-unorthodox and unlikely way, in the form of a child wrapped in rags and laid in a manger. This is the enormous universal truth come close. Yet without love being embodied, it wouldn't mean anything. It's fingers and toes, arms and legs; it is God indwelling in the world.

It is about the actualizing of love, the love your Creator has always had for you, and for all of creation.

God's love wasn't meant to simply exist. This love needed to be given as a personal gift... to you. It's like those gifts I gave earlier that were just sitting on shelves or tucked away in drawers. They weren't gifts yet. They were just objects collecting dust. Yet when they are given and received, they become gifts!

Look at it this way. If you are struggling with addiction, or depression, or pain, if your marriage is on the rocks, if your foundations have been shaken, this God, our God, chooses to come near to be an everyday struggle kind of God.

This isn't a clockmaker, who spun creation into being and then backed away to watch from amongst the stars.

No! Your God, Your Creator, Your Christ doesn't just give you a concept or a list of good ideas.

God comes among God's people to deliver liberation! You aren't just given a nice Christmas story; you're given salvation!

Right now, right here. Salvation lays in that manger, which is the true meaning of Christmas.

History is always vulnerable to an invasion of love. Right now, there is something, somewhere, someone in your life who desperately needs love. It's waiting for you to show up.

What you'll notice is when people have this story reduced to a narrow, tribal Jesus, one that is shrill and demanding, rather than loving and generous, then they will drift away from faith and from the church. Maybe that feels like you some of the time.

That narrowness only describes God as a fixer - that is too narrow to be salvation.

A narrow view of Jesus can't sustain the ambiguities of life, the mysteries that surround us, the complex struggles, the struggles where platitudes and bumper sticker answers fall short.

C. S. Lewis said, *"We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade the presence of God. The world is crowded with him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labor is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake."*¹

Jesus instead enters into the story, to point out the myths, the universals, the epic truths that have been here among us all along.

From the Jewish texts to the story of Jesus, God is revealed as the one, who is present in the darkest chapters.

God isn't like a cool uncle who only shows up at Christmas. God is the faithful parent who shows up in every moment of life.

The patterns of life, hope, faith, beauty, transformation, growth, flourishing; they have been a part of creation from the very beginning. We, humanity itself, were, after all, created, good; very good.

This story, if we let it, shows us a great truth. It opens us up to the mysteries of life that can't be contained by nice simple beliefs.

Statements, or creeds, or litmus tests, cannot explain the understandings and the ways of the human condition. But God in flesh and blood moving into our neighborhood

¹ CS Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (UK: Harcourt Brace, 1963), 75.

could! No belief statement can ever come even remotely close to explaining the Son of God, or as he preferred to be called, the Son of Man, the Human One.

That's one of the reasons, we as big D, Disciples of Christ, don't have a creed. We instead offer Christ.

Without the historic, without actions within time and space, without someone somewhere, welcoming the strangers, taking care of the widows, or bringing gifts to the orphans, someone cooking and feeding the alien, without an inn keeper or family member offering space even when every room is full, love doesn't invade. Without actual human beings, with hands and feet of love, without personal actions and gestures, without offering to each other what we actually have and possess, there is no love.

Teresa of Avila is famous for saying, *“Christ has no body on earth now but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on the world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.”*

Jesus the Christ, the one born in this manger, is an invasion of infinite love, the cosmic Christ becoming tangible, the one responsible for creation itself now has personhood in Jesus Christ.

This story is something else. It's not ordinary or simple. This is the gospel writers insisting that God is never something less and always something more. Jesus isn't just human or divine; he is human and divine.

This isn't magical thinking. It is a mystery to be seen and experienced.

Yet to say that Jesus is always with us kind of sounds like we have an invisible friend.

Yet, magical thinking and mystical seeing are not the same. Those who practice magical thinking believe they are altering the world with their behavior. Mystical seeing doesn't always change the world; it changes how we experience it.

For example, in the Beatitudes, Jesus describes an unlikely bunch as the ones being blessed: those who mourn, the meek, and the poor in spirit. Even though not all their worlds change, as they are still mourning and poor in spirit, nevertheless, they experience a blessing, because they can see the world differently.

What makes it so maddening is that while we want God to be God, God wants to be human. We want God to be strong, probably so that we can be weak. But God wants to be weak, so that we can be strong.

We want God to prove herself, but She answers: “Do you want proof or love?”

The revelation of Christmas is a relationship, God is not known dogmatically, but devotionally. “All you need is Love,” is not a simple Beatle’s song to just go around singing all the time. Love needs to take physical form.

Without actual love given and received in actual time and place, it’s just a song. Without the actual baby savior, it’s just a story.

“God as love,” is not a truth we can master. It is only one to which we can surrender.

I once heard when you are trying to teach someone shipbuilding, you don’t talk about the wood and the lumber or the length of the sail. You don’t talk about the tasks or the work. You try to instill in them the majesty and magic of the ocean. You teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.

Our focus, this night, tomorrow, and every day of the next entire year, needs to be attuned to the story and the awe and wonder, the glory of our God, come here, among God’s people. Or as Rev. Coffin said it, “In Christ’s birth, we ourselves shall be born again to a more loving, truthful, joyous life.”

We, as the church, need to be more than about the tasks of being Christians in the world. We need to gaze longingly at the ocean, knowing that the wild, risky, dangerous life of love is out there somewhere, beyond these walls, on the open waves.

We need to look around ourselves every day and ask the question, “What do I have that I can give? What gift, time, talent, physical object, can I give to my neighbors and those in need that can help teach about the vast ocean that is God’s love for humanity?”

As Henri Nouwen once said, “To care means, first of all, to empty our own cup and allow the other to come close to us; to take away the many barriers which prevent us from entering the communion with the other. When we dare to care, then we discover nothing human is foreign to us, that all hatred and love, cruelty and compassion, fear and joy, can be found in our own hearts. We can participate in the care of God who came, not to the powerful but powerless, not to be different but the same, not to take our pain away but to share it. Through this participation, we can open our hearts to each other and form a new community.”

History, and your own life, is always vulnerable to an invasion of love. The question is, are you going to notice it and embrace it when it does?

Thanks be to God. Amen.