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Christmas Eve, 2004
Luke 2:1-20

“The Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us”

This night is one of mystery and enchantment. All other words give way to the timelessness of Luke’s Gospel, the sacredness of silence, the flicker of raised candles, the melodies of choirs, the sharing of Holy Communion, the presence of loved ones narrate best the story of the Christ-child’s birth.

I have been, however, trying to reflect more deeply upon the gift of the incarnation. The gift of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The gift of light that comes into the darkness of a broken world, light that will never fall under the spell of darkness again. Incarnation, the God who stands out of time enters into time, the God who is infinite becomes finite, the God who is all powerful becomes all-vulnerable. The God whose womb bore the world now is born of a woman’s womb to bear the good news of peace on earth.

The Word that spoke the universe into being now cries from a baby’s lungs. The breath that swept across the dark waters, that separated the day from the night, that breath now blows softly on a teenage mother’s cheek, affirming her great joy, settling her rising fears, heaven and earth, past and present, healing and hope, they dance together in Mary’s poor and awkward arms this night.

In December 1914, World War I was only four months old, but already it had become the dark and bloody mess it would remain for the next four years. On France’s Western Front, soldiers of Kaiser Wilhelm II and George V faced off with one another from rows of frozen trenches. The cold winter rains had chilled them to the bone, and there was no relief from the endless layers of mud and constant sniper fire. On Christmas Eve 1914, Scottish troops looked out across No Man’s Land and noticed lights in the German trenches. In the evening twilight, they made out the silhouettes of Christmas trees. Laughter drifted across the darkening sky. The lights of those Christmas Trees, Tannenboums, burned brighter, and pretty soon the Scottish troops heard a rich baritone voice begin to sing: “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.” Silent Night, Holy Night,” peering into the darkness of No Man’s Land, the ground littered with German and Allied dead, seeing the lights of the Christmas Trees, and hearing that lone voice, one Scotsman said: “It was strange, like being in another world, to which we had come through a nightmare, a world finer than the one left behind.” That Christmas Eve in 1914, in the midst of all that power and warfare, the sounds of a world bent on destroying itself, there appeared an unexpected gift, the gift of song, the gift of tenderness, the gift of peace on earth breaking forth into the dark chaos.

On Christmas Day, The Royal Flying Corp got into the Christmas spirit. A plane was sent up over the German lines and dropped a padded, brandy-steeled case of plum pudding behind the German trenches. The German troops seemed to appreciate this, so they sent up their own plane with a careful airdrop of a bottle of rum. The Allied soldiers really appreciated that. After darkness settled across the lines that night, an ambitious Allied soldier took a Tannenbaum topped by a Star of Bethlehem, leapt out of his own trench, oblivious to the bullet that whizzed by his head, and took that bright light across the death of No Man's Land, and sprang into the German trenches, the glow of its light fell everywhere, all the shooting stopped, and soldiers on both sides gathered to celebrate Christmas, singing Silent Night.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 spread up and down the Western Front, and for several days the fighting and killing stopped. Soldiers traded tobacco and photographs, a football game broke out between the Germans and the Allies. It's very difficult to kill someone you've played football with. So much interchange occurred across the lines that generals on both sides issued unequivocal directives forbidding the fraternization, claiming "it discouraged initiative and destroyed morale in the ranks."

On this Christmas Eve, the ways of the world are once again turned upside down. In a world consumed by never-ending violence and life-shattering warfare, the soft cries of Mary's child are more deafening than any bomb, a sacred reminder that power is not displayed in the weapons of war, but belongs to the vulnerability of a new-born baby. No longer does the world bow to Ceasar Augustus, or Quirinius of Syria, or Herod of Judea, or Kaiser Wilhelm, or George V, or any of the politicians, kings, generals, or CEOs that normally command the world's attention. No longer does the economy of goods and services turn the world on its axis, but the love that moves the stars.

The King of kings is born in a stable with a few lowly shepherds as the guests of honor. The gift of this day is God's love for the world and the package is flesh and blood cradled in a frightened peasant girl's arms, the most powerful force that the world has ever known. And we who have been hardened by the tenacity of our lives, bruised and scarred by shattered dreams and broken hopes. We who turn on the television, listen to the radio, read the newspaper each day, and hear painful news of bloodshed and sadness, of poverty and illness, we who have become steeled to the brutal stories of the world around us, who are saddened by the dark places in our own lives, we need this gift of tenderness and mercy.

We are like shepherds in the dark night, scanning the horizon for any signs of hope, for the promise that this world is not all there is, that the darkness will give way to a light that shall not be overcome.

Like Odysseus strapped to the mast of his ship, we strain our ears in the darkness, longing for the sweet melody of something more beautiful than the loud but hallow songs of media and culture that narrate most of our living.

More often than not, despite our best intentions, we resemble the old miser Silas Marner from George Elliot's book. Elliot tells of this reclusive hardened man who blocks out the world around him, and gives himself only to a spinning loom and to the accumulation of gold that he hides under his bed. One day he comes home to find that his gold is gone, some thief has stolen the treasure of his life, and he is left distraught. Every day he would return to his home, hoping beyond hope that the gold had reappeared. One day he came home and saw a glint of light on the floor, his heart leapt for joy, his gold had been returned, but when he stretched out his hand he found, instead of hard coin, soft curls on his floor – a sleeping child. Elliot narrates the scene like this: "He had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from a far off life. It stirred old quiverings of tenderness – old impressions of awe of some power presiding over his life . . . [We] older human beings, with our inward turmoil, feel a certain awe in the presence of a little child, such as we feel before some quiet majesty or beauty in the earth or sky."

It happens to us adults tonight, fresh from the glitz of the shopping malls, frazzled by the hurried pace of the season, worn thin by the year's hard and sweaty work of succeeding and advancing, empowered by our own quest after whatever form gold takes in our own lives. Tonight we come face to face with the way God works in the world.

Silas Marner took the little girl in his lap, "trembling with an emotion mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life. He could only have said that the child had come instead of the gold – that the gold had turned into the child."

The child that comes this night is truth and grace. He comes to a world overcome with darkness to be the light that that will forever shine. He comes to a world overrun by senseless noise to sing the melody of peace. He comes to your life and my life as a priceless gift, the only gift that really matters, to turn the world upside down, to take away the hard edges and make us tender.

The angels and archangels and all the company of heaven agreed, it was an outrageous plan. This idea of God's to become a baby, a real human baby, weak and vulnerable, at the mercy of everything that afflicts human life. The courts of heaven advised against it. It was too risky, surely there were other ways God could show God's love to God's people, through stories and history, ritual and symbol, laws and prophets. "Already been tried," God said. The angels continued to argue with themselves about this risk-taking display of God's power, but as they did, God turned around and left the cabinet chamber, shedding his robes as he went. Barbara Brown Taylor finishes the story like this:

The angels watched as his midnight blue mantle fell to the floor, so that all the stars on it collapsed in a heap. Then a strange thing happened. Where the robes had fallen, the floor melted and opened up to reveal a scrubby brown pasture speckled with sheep – and right in the middle of them – a bunch of shepherds sitting around a campfire drinking wine out of a skin. It was hard to say who was more startled, the shepherds or the angels, but as the shepherds looked up at them, the angels pushed their senior member

to the edge of the hole. Looking down at the human beings who were all trying to hide behind each other, the angel said in as gentle a voice as he could muster, “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.”

And away up the hill, from the direction of town, came the sound of a newborn baby’s cry.

**I am indebted to the Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor, and her sermon “God’s Daring Plan,” for the closing illustration.*