

Lectionary Readings for Christmas Eve

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.

Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Hebrews 1: 1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

John 1: 1-14

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, and 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.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Sermon for Christmas Eve

The why? questions go deepest.

When a Jewish family is seated around the table for the Passover meal the youngest child at the table asks the question:

“Why is this night different from all other nights?”

What does it mean, in other words, to sit down in this way and partake of this particular meal together—why do we do it?

Christians have inherited this tradition of asking questions and of commemoration—of sharing a meal—in order not to forget. This meal is our Eucharist.

We also ask a *why* question in order to tell the story of this meal—in order not to forget.

These beautiful words of Luke—*and she laid the baby in a manger*—and these beautiful words of John—*and the Word became flesh and lived among us*—they are the words of the story we tell each Christmas Eve, year after year.

Our *why* question is this one:
Why do we re-tell this story of Jesus’s birth, again and again and again?
Why do we do this?

Because although the story doesn’t change, *we change*.
What we live through in a year, a year from our last telling of the story, changes us.
And so we hear the story, each year, in a different way.

It is a story we do not want to forget.

We tell the story, we approach the manger, altered by all the other births, and deaths, and joys, and sadnesses, of all the people we have known and loved, or just been thrown up against and asked to embrace, in the year that has just passed. Not to mention the great, global tragedies of our day: the constricting of lives, and the very real suffering, caused by the coronavirus pandemic sweeping through whole populations, the uncertainty of Brexit, the desperation that leads to terrorism, climate change that is causing Africa and many other parts of our world to lose all hope.

All these things have changed us.

But we come here, year after year, with the same *need*: for comfort, and for hope.

Isaiah's prophecy announces that the one foretold has indeed brought both comfort and redemption;

Hebrews proclaims that in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son...who is the reflection of God's own glory;

John says that *we have seen* the glory of this Son, full of grace and truth.

Isaiah, Hebrews, John—their words are all part of the story.

What does this story have to say to us, we who come for comfort and for hope?
Why do we not want to forget this story?

Because this story, unlike other stories that are told to while away the time, to entertain a few friends, to share a funny thing that happened the other day—
this story has the power to transform us.

This is a story of our God who did not forget. God who kept close to his people, the Hebrews, our ancestors in the faith. But theirs was an old story of promise, and breaking promise; promise, and breaking promise. The Hebrews, in an all too human way, kept thinking about what they were going to eat and drink and how comfortable they were. And if other gods might not be better.

In the end, God chose to break the old pattern by breaking into the world in a new way, in the form of a small and vulnerable baby who would shatter all their ideas about both comfort and hope.

Jesus didn't fulfill any prophecies as they were supposed to be fulfilled. He didn't care about power, or prestige, or wealth, or how a king would look. He said to those who could hear: this is what the kingdom of God is like. It is like an outcast Samaritan who cares for a Jew who has been beaten up by robbers; it is like a father who welcomes back a prodigal son; it is like a shepherd who cannot bear to leave behind even one sheep that is lost.

And then he said, astoundingly, today all these words are fulfilled in your hearing. In my very person the Kingdom has broken through.

If we take seriously this claim of the baby in the manger, who came to be the one who was crucified out of love for us, this story will change us forever. If we are prepared to take upon ourselves the way of life that he embodied, we ourselves will be transformed into His likeness.

That is the power of the story.

With God, nothing is impossible. When we despair of ourselves, of our relationships,
of our ability to influence the large events of our time, of our ability to do anything
the way we think it ought to be done,
God is, yet, still at work in this world, still at work in us.

Perhaps God has already shown us all that we need to see. I think it is in the darkness
of this time of year that is easiest to create a space of silence, to open our hearts and
minds to see what is already before us—the baby in the manger.

What we were shown in that nativity of long ago was that power does not matter;
prestige does not matter; great wealth does not matter. Kindness, compassion, loving
care for others—these matter. If these qualities take hold of us, the world is affected
— the balance of good and evil tips.

It may seem difficult to open ourselves to this miraculous possibility.

But just as God sent His Son
in the form and shape of a helpless infant in an animal's feeding trough,
so he sends us.

To the biggest *why* question of all: *Why are we here?*, this is the answer:
you are here to turn your face to others and get to work to help them
in whatever way you can, just as Jesus did.

The days pass. The news just gets worse and worse.
But the time is *now*, this season, this eve, this celebration of new birth,
this miracle that is ours to embrace.
And that is only good news.

Why *do* we tell this story, year after year?
Because this unforgettable story is for us:
changed as we are by all that we have experienced in this year just past,
we see what power this Christ-birth has to change the world in the time to come.
May we open ourselves to its possibility *in us*,
and get to work.

Amen.

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