

## Christmas Eve 2022

And so, this is our last Christmas Eve together.

And while I could say that about every Sunday between now and October, I promise — I won't!

But probably there are three sermons between now and then when I remind you that my ministry here is ending.

The first is tonight, the second will be Easter and the last will be on October 15, my last Sunday with you.

That's because, after these nearly 14 years together, we've taken a long and wonderful journey together.

And it makes sense, at least on a few occasions, to look back and see where we have come from.

To see where we are today.

So this Christmas Eve, what occurs to me mostly is that the story of Christmas is about what the church could be — but too often is not.

Too often the church becomes a club with its insiders and outsiders, its social strata, and even its own caste system.

With its hierarchy of clergy and lay people.

With its social ladder of old timers and newcomers.

But that isn't what the church is called to be, and that isn't who St Elizabeth's is.

From the moment that Mary learns she will be the person through whom the ineffable, invisible, ever-existing God will take on human form and live among us, God's purpose is to change, radically and completely, how it is that we human beings organize ourselves.

How we relate to each other.

How we care for one another.

And so Mary's prayer, the prayer we prayed during the third Sunday of Advent, the prayer that Marty and Janie sang so beautifully two weeks ago, the prayer known to us as the Magnificat, speaks of tearing down arrogant rulers, lifting up the poor, feeding the hungry, in short, creating a world in which everyone is valued.

A world in which everyone is honored, because everyone is made in the image and likeness of God.

That theme of the essential unity of humanity continues when the birth is first announced.

Because, to whom does God send his angels?

God sends these angels to the ancient world's equivalent of the Hells Angels motorcycle gang!

Otherwise known as shepherds!

Shepherds, that despised and unruly group of no-good-nicks if ever there was one!

They were rumored to engage in various unspeakable acts that we shall not mention tonight, and were generally known to be drunkards and barstool breakers when they came into town.

And yet it is to them, not to kings or billionaires or popes, that this magnificent news is first announced.

And this magnificent news is also announced to another unlikely, and unexpected group.

That group would be those aliens from a distant land who are nudged to follow a star.

These Magi, these magicians, astrologers, and probably wealthy men, make the long journey from Iran, all the way to Bethlehem, following the intuition that they are urged to follow.

And so it is that illegal aliens and gangsters converge on the holy barn.

All because God is intent on turning how we relate to each other upside down.

And isn't that why we are here tonight?

We are here because you have responded to the invitation to encounter, perhaps for the first time, this God who is so crazy in love with all of creation that God crashes the very party she set in motion so long ago.

And in the process, God sets in motion a new mystical path by which all of creation, including every last human being, even you, even me, will someday become — one with God!

The mystery that we come to remember tonight, to become a part of again tonight, is that on a particular night in human history, in a particular place, and to two particular parents, the Creator of all things becomes one with creation - by becoming a human being.

Why does it matter?

It matters in part because God's "commitment to a human body means your body matters.

That God's willingness to be known in the flesh means that caring for the least and the lost, in the flesh, matters." Karoline Lewis, paraphrased.

That what matters is not only what happens after we close our eyes for the last time in death, but that the life we are living, here and now, matters.

That as much as this holy night teaches us something about God - that God is gracious and full of humility, that God adores each and every human person - this night also teaches us about ourselves.

That our destiny is to be united with God.

To become become One with God.

And because unity with God is our destiny, God invites, cajoles, even begs us, to try that life on today, without delay!

Faith is an invitation to step into God's kingdom at this very moment!

How do we step inside God's kingdom?

When we practice compassion.

When we forgive.

When we speak up for the vulnerable.

When we leap, trusting that the net shall appear.

Unity with God.

This is the high calling of every human life – and of all of creation as well.

It's not something we have to earn or deserve.

It is the central truth about Reality!

All things exist in God.

Period.

End of sentence.

The branch is always connected to the vine.

But because we are mesmerized by the dim candles of our own creation: fame, money and power; we are often stuck in the illusion that we are separated from God, and from one another.

Our task therefore, each and every day, is to reject the illusion.

To reclaim our true nature.

For then we can live each and every day with both eyes fixed on our true destiny, on our true identity.

That process is already at work.

“The True Self -- where you and God are one -- does not choose to love as much as it is love itself.

That’s what St Paul is saying when he reminds the earliest Christians that:

‘You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

And when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.’

The True Self doesn’t teach us compassion — as much as it is compassion.

Loving from this core of your being is like a river flowing within you of its own accord, which is why Jesus says:

‘Whoever believes in me ... will find rivers of living water flowing within themselves.’

And let’s be clear, when Jesus talks about ‘believing,’ it’s not something we do with our head, it’s something we do with our feet!

Do I stand in a place of isolation, looking out for number one?

Or do I stand in solidarity with the least and the lost of this world?

What flows from that grace-filled standpoint of solidarity is connection, empathy, forgiveness, and love.

We were made in love, and for love, and to love.

This deep inner 'yes' is God in me, loving God — through me.

The false self, 'infatuated with the flickering candle of self,' doesn't know how to love.

It's too self-centered, too small, to know anything of compassion, mercy, or kindness." R. Rohr, paraphrased.

This holy night, as we celebrate God becoming the first truly human being, remember this: you are made in the image and likeness of God.

And in this child, through the grace of God, all of humanity is home free.

The groaning of creation will one day find its new birth.

"A magnificent, yet delicate project, worked out over the vast expanse of time.

Revealing not the power of one who insists on everyone cleaning up their act, but the greater power of one who patiently and compassionately and gently loves us into being.

This gracious God — for whom time — doesn't matter." James Allison. paraphrased.

On this holy night, take that deep dive into the flow of the living God.

That flow is not only your birthright, it is also your destiny.

+amen

