“Set the Clock of your heart”- Will Sparks

 One of the coolest things for a parent is the first moment when you hear the heartbeat of a yet unborn child in the womb. How many of you have ever heard that sound? It is truly amazing isn’t it.

 All through the season of Advent which is the four or so weeks leading up to Christmas we have been hearing the song the youth choir just sang and have been thinking about the coming of the baby Jesus and all that he means to us. We have been imagining that with his birth, a new heartbeat came into the world. It is true, a new baby was born, but something happened in the hearts of everyone else in the story too. This new baby did something in the heart of his mother, in the heart of his father, in the heart of everyone he touched.

 Tonight we celebrate a new heart beat, a new rhythm that came into the world and has affected our world. It was the rhythm of a gospel of radical love, of liberation for his people, for all people. It was a mystical rhythm.

 Place your hand over your heart. Some people can feel their heartbeat just by doing that. Know that within you there is a rhythm- a physical rhythm but also a spiritual rhythm. I am guessing that if you are a child, your internal rhythm is thumping a little faster because ITS CHRISTMAS EVE!!! I am guessing that if you are a parent of a child, your heart will finally slow down a bit around 10pm. Sometimes when we are scared we can feel our internal rhythm race. Some people when they are angry can feel their heart beat in their face.

 Well tonight we hear the story of the birth of Jesus which is the story of a new rhythm coming into the world. And we have a chance to sense that new rhythm- that new heartbeat, and to open our own heart to it again.

Luke 2:1-5 read by Treena Duncan

Joseph read by Stan Mortensen

 My name is Joseph and I am an artisan. I work my craft with my hands, building with wood out of my shop in Nazareth. I have always lived in Nazareth learning my craft alongside my father. We live a peaceful life as long as the Roman Legion leave us alone. In recent times the Romans have been building a huge city to the west of us, Sepphoris, and every year they squeeze us a little more to fund their great monuments to Caesar Augustus.

 We got the news a few weeks ago that a new tax regime was coming in and everyone had to return to their family home to register. For us that meant the long trek to Bethlehem where my ancestors lived, a couple of weeks on the road, only so that we can be counted, and they can squeeze us even harder.

 The road is no place for us right now. It is dangerous at the best of times, with Roman Legion, thieves and bandits, especially through the mountains north of the Salt Sea. And with Mary in her final weeks, we were sitting ducks, unable to move quickly, always last to arrive at a resting place for the night. Every night I have slept with one eye open and my carving blade in my hand, afraid of what the darkness might bring.

 People say, “you must be excited about your first child. Have you got your heart set on a boy?” they say, “to carry on the business?”

My heart? My heart has been so on edge, so fearful of what might be lurking around the next corner, so tense about Mary’s health and comfort, I haven’t given a second’s thought to what happens after. Tense and fearful. That is the rhythm of my heart.

Luke 2:6-7 read by Treena Duncan

Mary read by Suzanne Patterson

 When I was growing up I used to go with my mother to deliveries and I would help her. She was a midwife in Nazareth and women would call on her throughout their pregnancy for herbs and remedies to soothe them. She would arrive early in pregnancy and offer a tincture for morning sickness. And then in the last month, when things got really uncomfortable, they would come and get her and she would come with her gentle voice and masterful hands to easy the discomfort. And of course, when labor set in, we would be there. I watched her with the other women. First time mothers needed the community of women to ease them through the pain, through the fear, through the long labor. And then when the child was born, we were there to staunch the flow of blood, get the nursing started, ease the pain.

 As a girl I imagined childbirth and what it would be like for me, especially the first time. I imagined my mother there, and the other women. I imagined it would be painful but I also imagined bringing a newborn into the world, into the community. I never cared whether a boy or a girl- they both come with their divine blessing and their joy. I never imagined it would be like this.

 I am just so very tired- bone weary. Of all the times for the Romans to impose a census- in my final month. The days of walking were exhausting, and being carried on the Donkey was not much better. My legs are sore, my back aches constantly, and sleep is so short and fitful. I was afraid I would go into labor on the road. And then to arrive late at night into Bethlehem only to find that there is no place to stay. Thanks be to God at least there is a stable and some hay.

 Labor was hard and fast. Obviously this child wanted in to this world. He is so small and so beautiful, and I am so grateful and so tired.

My heart? My heart is full and empty at the same time- full of gratitude, and utterly spent. I just hope now that I can sleep.

Luke 2:8-9 read by Shelley Sparks

Shepherds read by Rod Carter

Luke 2:10-14 read by Shelley Sparks

Angels- read by Emily Sparks

 You know what it’s like when you have the best news ever and you don’t have anyone to share it with- or at least nobody new to share it with.

That story you just read says that there were, with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host. Actually there were only a few of them with me, but by God we were so exciiiiiteeeed!!! We probably seemed like a multitude.

 I guess the shepherd wasn’t really expecting me because he looked absolutely terrified. I think I woke him up, and at first I think he thought he was having a nightmare. I said, “you gotta come! Right now! You gotta come and see! You’ll never believe it!!!”

 And then I realized that he was scared because he was hiding behind a rock. So I calmed myself down a bit and told him not to be scared, but that I was here to give him the best news of his life. I told him about the baby born in the stable, that was destined to save his people! And then the others showed up, and everybody was singing. And then we left to tell more people the good news.

 Oh… I will never forget that night. My heart was racing I was so excited. I thought my heart would leap right out of my chest!

The Rhythm of Wonder- Will Sparks

 “Is there a place where my heart needs to go?” Well, probably. Every year we hear this story, and I believe every year that’s a question we need to ask ourselves. This year, at this time in your life, at this place in the world’s life, is there a place in life where you especially need to experience the resounding rhythm of unconditional love?

 I am sure you have noticed as a child comes into the world, a new baby is born and everybody around them loses focus on whatever they were doing and focuses on the baby. Just watch for a while when you are in a gathering and someone arrives with a baby. Babies seem to carry with them the ability to turn otherwise coherent adults into bundles of cooing, babbling nonsense. And if you look at the way gatherings are configured, you will see that before the child, people are talking in groups and after the child arrives, the world revolves around that little one. The infant claims the attention, and grasps the heart.

 Infants can also turn your world upside down, and put everything else in your life into perspective. And so God comes to us as an infant, in vulnerability, to say to us, folks I am at the heart of life. I am with you in the heart of your life. God, the maker of heaven and earth, God the power of love itself, God the amazing genius of wonder is not just an idea, is not just a theory, not just a founding principle, not even a hovering presence , watching from a distance.

 No, this is the night we celebrate God who is closer than we ever imagined. God has chosen to be born in vulnerability because that is the form that truly moves us.

 Friends, know this night that wherever your heart is, whatever crazy kind of rhythm it is pounding out, there is God, vulnerably, deeply lovingly. See if you can set your heart to the rhythm of wonder.