**Christmas Eve 2019**

**St. Clement’s Anglican Church**

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 98

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:8-20

About five years ago I was walking along the rough and tumble sidewalks of the Downtown Eastside on a Sunday afternoon, desperately trying not to look like an uninvited do-gooder. Along with a church group, I was being introduced around the neighbourhood on an educational mission by a resident; but even with our best of intentions it was impossible not to feel like a voyeur as we stepped gingerly around sleeping bodies on the sidewalk, edged by the selling of various goods on the pavement, and avoided the detritus inevitably left by human beings who have no room to call their own.

In contrast, I had a hefty ring of keys in my pocket, linking me to home, to office, to vehicles. I had the luxury of weather-appropriate clothing. I could choose whether or not to eat lunch that day. My comfortable, middle-class status felt foreign on these streets, and an intrusion to those whose lives played out on their sidewalks. My feelings may well have been shared by the neighbourhood residents we passed, people who avoided our eyes and stepped around us as politely and carefully as we stepped around them. We saw smiles and greetings aplenty, but we were strangers here and so in the main they were not meant for us.

But then another member of our church came into sight. The young woman was pushing her new baby across the street in a carriage, intent on catching up with our group. As she maneuvered the pram up over the curb, the energy around us suddenly shifted. A man nearby, who until then had been leaning against a storefront, turned down the street and shouted “Baby on the block! Baby on the block!” The cry was passed along, and as it rippled from one group to another, drugs and needles were tucked out of sight, and people sitting on the pavement pulled back their feet to allow passage. Bartering of goods on the sidewalk temporarily ceased. For those moments, as we walked down the block alongside the carriage, there was no stranger or local, homeless or housed. There was just the fact of a baby - and a radical shift in the very air around her.

The nativity story we tell at Christmas time isn’t a children’s story. It is sometimes easy for us adults to dismiss tales of the stable, to take heed of historical inaccuracies, to relegate the manger scenes to Christmas cards and decorative mantelpiece displays. We forget, perhaps, the unique power of a baby to unite us and transform us, whatever our background or personality type or personal circumstance. The power to recall us all to our best selves, the selves we want our babies to see when they look out at the world around them. Jesus’s birth was announced by the angel as being “good news of great joy for *all* people” – is it any surprise, then, that God came to us as a baby?

It’s an expression oft-repeated by sleep-deprived but rapturous new parents: “A baby changes everything.” I think owners of puppy dogs can relate, too. A baby elicits a new kind of love from us; demands unprecedented commitment, offers unimagined joys. And so it is with the infant in whose birth we participate tonight. Welcoming this baby into our lives changes everything; that’s a truth that can hit us like a thunderclap, or one that we can spend a lifetime living into. The nativity story is told in terms and images simple enough for children to understand, but it carries a message, and an invitation, that none of us can outgrow.

Luke’s birth narrative reminds us, too, of the great paradox of infancy. A baby has enormous power. Power to change us, power to reach into our lives and our hearts and forever transform us. And yet a baby cannot survive without protection. God’s own son could not have survived without the loving attention and watchfulness and sacrifices of his earthly parents. So as we celebrate Christ’s birth, we are invited into a mutual relationship with God. A relationship in which God in Christ Jesus will draw the best from us, if we in turn provide shelter for God. A relationship in which we truly understand that Christ has no hands or feet but ours in this world, and that in using them to serve others we are most able to feel the love of God ourselves. A mutual relationship that continues despite us; despite those times of distraction, anger or inattentiveness, because it is a relationship that is protected in the deepest recesses of our soul.

It’s true that caring for a baby can be overwhelming at times. We can feel similarly overwhelmed at the thought of what it means to nurture the Christ child in us. How can our hearts possibly stretch big enough to live up to this responsibility? We watch A Christmas Carol on television and rejoice at the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge. We want to be just like him, spreading good cheer and acts of kindness all year through. But we are busy; we are flawed; we can be cranky or tired or feeling uninspired. Does God really think we are up to the task of living out the ideals made incarnate in the life of Jesus Christ?

It seems that God does. Over and over again, God chooses ordinary people like Mary, like Joseph, and like us to do the most extraordinary things. As noted by the mystic Meister Eckhart in the early 14th century, “We are all meant to be mothers of God, because God is always needing to be born.”

Gathering together around the manger tonight gives all of us a place to stop and wonder what is waiting in us to be born. Or what it is – within us or around us – that we most need to nourish and protect if it is to survive and grow into the fullness that God desires. Sometimes when we sit down with a self-help book and a pencil and paper to create a vision for our lives, we understandably think about our careers, our retirement savings, the dream of a mortgage-free home. But are those, indeed, our chief aspirations, our greatest treasures? Or are we forgetting the simpler, deeper joys of humankind to which God calls us?

I suspect most of us need to hear the message of the shepherds over and over again, those shepherds among us who catch our attention by shouting “Baby on the block, baby on the block!” Like Mary, may we treasure these words and keep them close to our heart.

May God and God’s good works be born in you, again and again. May you never cease to wonder at the transforming, vulnerable infant who came so that all people may know themselves beloved of their Creator. May the love of Christ Jesus bring a lasting joy to you and yours this Christmas, and, as we turn your gaze from the manger to the year that awaits, may we trust that God walks with us every step of our journey, wherever it may lead.

*-The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*