

Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2015  
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### **Christmas Presence**

“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven,” Amen.

The Christmas rush has quieted and the candles are lit. We gather to sing carols and hear the timeless story of a babe in a manger, of peace born to the earth. The nativity scene is a welcome respite from our daily frenetic life. This day comes with so much anticipation. We set our traditions in motion and their familiar rhythm creates a sense of comfort and joy. More than any other time of year, we want this holiday to be picture perfect.

Yet some may not have come to church on this night as a matter of tradition, but to hear a word of hope and to taste the promise of renewal. God knows we could use a little good news. Whatever expectations we bring, the Christmas story is meant to change us. Four weeks of Advent prepare our hearts to receive the gift of this night, God with us, Emmanuel. We wait in hope that Christ’s coming into the world will make a difference. Christ was not born to make things nicer, but to redeem a suffering world and to bring God’s love to all.

It’s hard to imagine that a little baby lying in a manger could create such a stir. After all Mary and Joseph were of such little means that no one could have considered their journey to Bethlehem conspicuous. They traveled there because the census required Joseph to return to his hometown.

All had to be registered for taxes and military draft, as Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman Empire through wealth and military force. While great cities were built and the empire expanded, conditions were oppressive for those of little means. Word reached the King of Judea that a Messiah, the long awaited one, was to be born and would be king. He took every precaution that his throne would not be threatened and began a reign of violence. It was a dark time and people lived in fear.

If we look just beneath the surface of that silent night we know it was not such a serene tableau. Imagine that young dislocated couple looking for shelter and a place to rest, because Mary’s time was very near. How frightening their world must have seemed. Weary and homeless, they could not have envisioned what was ahead. The scripture skips over the conditions of the stable and the hours of Mary’s labor and takes us right to the babe in a manger. How fitting that this one who would feed us for generations was laid in a feeding trough. God’s point was clear: God incarnate came not in power but in vulnerability and tenderness, to show us that the world was to be different. Heaven and earth were joined in that thin place of the stable.

The Shepherds were the first to know, those unwashed herders who lived on the margins. God chose unlikely characters to fulfill the plan. When a great light shone around them the angel said, “Do not be afraid, I bring you good news: to you is born this day, a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Could this be the one for whom they waited? Dare they hope for light to pierce their dark existence?

Now in our time God’s presence isn’t usually announced with a multitude of the heavenly host or bright lights gleaming in the dark. How silently the wondrous gift is given. The trouble is,

sometimes we don't recognize the gift right before our very eyes. Christ is found in the most unexpected places. More often than not he appears in the face of things that most challenge us. Look a little deeper into those places because they too are thin veils between heaven and earth. Perhaps we too construct a tableau of our own lives that is lovely but fragile and ultimately insufficient. God gives us the gift of presence, so that our hearts will be redeemed.

Do not underestimate the power of this tender tale handed down through generations. If we understand its subversive message it has great implications for us today. When we believe that heaven and earth have come together and our transcendent God in Christ has come near, there is hope for each of us. And when the violence strikes around us and our tableau is dismantled, God comes to redeem us.

This Christmas story is about presence, the presence of God come to earth to bring life to all. But the birth of Christ is for a purpose beyond our comfort and joy. Our God of relationship weaves us into the plan of redemption, drawing us in through that little baby. If God's greatness can come into the world as a child, why cannot God's love be made manifest in us as we believe and live in to God's plan? The story of the incarnation doesn't end with the birth of Jesus but is the ongoing transformative work in us as we spread the kingdom of God, one relationship at a time. If we participate we are changed.

How will Christ's coming into the world make a difference for you? Look into those thin places and do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy. To you is born this day in the city of David, a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord." Christmas blessings to one and all. Amen.