

When heaven and earth met the shepherds were terrified. Which isn't surprising considering they had been awakened from sleep by the bright lights and incredible message of an angel. But then, the shepherds traded their fear for curiosity and went to see for themselves what it looks like when God keeps God's promise. It was the shepherds who shared the message of the angels and everyone who heard it was amazed. Everyone, that is, except one person. One person on the holy night we celebrate tonight, thousands of years later, was not amazed by the message of angels nor the visitation of shepherds who had left their flocks. One person treasured every word and pondered what those words meant for her, for the vulnerable newborn lying in a manger, for the shepherds who had visited them, and perhaps she even pondered what those words would mean for all the people of the world, even for you and me.

On this holy night, in the midst of singing angels, rejoicing shepherds and those lost in amazement, Jesus' mother Mary shows us a side of Christmas that has always been here but isn't often seen through the excitement, busyness, and traditions of this holy day. Since many of us did not get to attend or participate in a church service last year, perhaps the reflective side of Christmas stands out more this year. Perhaps this Christmas Mary's response is the one that can bring us closer to what all the carols and scripture readings and prayers this night celebrate: the Incarnation, holy Mystery of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

It's all there in the angel's message: unto us is born a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. That's a lot of churchy words said all in one breath. Ancient words that had been gathering the hopeful dust of religion for so long, it is no wonder they could inspire joy by leaping from the pages of the prophets and from the highest heaven to embody a helpless, vulnerable baby here on earth. It might also sound like an impossible message.

Impossible that a baby is our Savior. Normally this term was used as an honorary title for emperors, not infants born to poor displaced parents. But Jesus brings into being a new kingdom, one where injustice, violence and the abuse of power is not tolerated. Where the Savior is also the crucified one, who felt the pain and suffering caused by fear that power would be taken away. The One who died on the cross and was raised to new life. The new life that defeated the power of death and sin. The impossible would be realized, yet that holy night, the Savior was a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

Impossible as it might sound, that baby is Lord, as people would call the man he became. The man who turned water into wine, who healed the sick and restored them to wholeness of body, mind, soul, heart, and strength. The man who fed thousands with only a few loaves of bread and sent a rich man away empty. The man who calmed stormy waters and restored life to the dead. Yet on that holy night the Lord of heaven and earth was lying in a manger, a helpless baby, dependent on his mother for care.

He was recognized as the Messiah, the one who brought to fulfillment the way of life God intended for the world. He forgave sins and restored all people to a right relationship with God. He instituted Holy Communion, himself the Bread of Life which gives life to the world. Yet, on that holy night, he was a baby sleeping in a food box, a manger.

This is the glory of God. A helpless, vulnerable infant born not to the rich and powerful but to the poor and displaced. That is where heaven and earth met that holy night. When God became flesh, God did not appear as a hero in a cape, or a knight on a war horse, or a politician in a suit and tie, or an entrepreneurial businessman in jeans and a black sweater. God came among us to love us, not conquer us, or get us to spend our money on his endorsed products. To show us how much God loves us, God became as helpless and vulnerable and dependent as we all are. This is God's glory.

And this glory gives peace. Peace that the world cannot give. Peace that is not absence of conflict. Peace that only Jesus, our Savior, our Lord, and Christ can bring. Peace that restores wholeness to all people. The wholeness or well-being that was lost to sin. To things like selfishness, greed, carelessness, the things that rob us of well-being. Not just personal well-being, but well-being of relationships with other people, with God, and with all the earth. Jesus was born to restore this peace, this wholeness, this well-being to all people and to the world, as God's gift to us, so that we all can love God and each other.

This restoration of peace is the good news of great joy the angels proclaimed that holy night. The very same good news Mary treasured as she watched her newborn son sleep in his manger bed.

I do not know what you are treasuring in your heart tonight as we celebrate that holy night. Perhaps you are distracted thinking of tasks you have yet to do to get ready for family or friends gathering for your own celebration? Maybe you worrying over gifts and how people will receive them? Are you excited to be gathering again or are you anxious or weary from the overwhelming exhaustion of the pandemic? Maybe you are afraid, like the shepherds? Or disappointed that things have not returned the normal you remember fondly? Perhaps you are

grieving the loss of loved ones, or a lifestyle or identity you lost with a job? Maybe you are hopeful that the world is learning from the disparities the pandemic exposed and making changing to make life a little better for everyone?

Depending on what is in our hearts, it can be difficult to hear and receive the message of the angels and see for ourselves the love of God here with us in person. Perhaps that why we need Jesus tonight. Jesus the Savior. Jesus the Lord. Jesus the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus the baby who was born to those who were terrified and curious, doubting and obedient, worried and excited, weary and hopeful, amazed and distracted, happy and grieving so that they can love Jesus who loves us.

Perhaps the message of Christmas we need most is that Jesus was born as vulnerable as we all are because God's love meets us where we are, grows with us, restores us to wholeness, and gives us peace. Which means, whatever is in our hearts, whenever we receive God's love and love God, heaven and earth meet once again. It can even happen tonight.

Merry Christmas