

THIS STORIED NIGHT
Rev. Gregory Flint
10p.m. Service on Christmas Eve, 2011

I'm always astonished by this night. The selling of Christmas since the day after Halloween, the ads in which Christmas comes as a luxury car with a great red bow on the roof, the bickering about "Merry Christmas" versus "Happy Holidays", the weariness of once again trying to do too much...none of it has diminished the holiness, the mystery of this Christ-birth Eve.

And the story we read again this holy night, the carols we sing, are always somehow new.

Greeting each other matters terribly this night. There is a quickening in one another's presence.

Even time feels different tonight, as if we have come to a still point, where earth and heaven, humanity and divinity, our lives and eternity, intersect.

It feels as if we have been waiting for this night, not just during the weeks of Advent, but waiting our whole lives....

And we do bring to this Holy Night our whole lives: with all of our human askings and yearnings; our unsolved dilemmas and difficulties; our anguish about all the senseless, hard, loss-making things that happen; and all the terrible, death-dealing things in the world.

So on this Holy Night, joy and pain mix, hope mingles with fear, grief with gratitude. It is always so on Christmas Eve.

But I must tell you, I have been a pastor nigh unto 40 years, and really never before have I heard so many talk about their fears for the future. Never have so many told me they can't bear to read the newspaper. Never have so many said they feel a kind of chronic anger and angst. Never have I had so many conversations in which people talk about fighting grimly against pessimism, even despair.

So we bring that too, gathered as we are on this night of Christ Birth. And in the stillness of this sanctuary a simple story is read. Just this: that the time came; and a young woman gives birth in a stable; and the baby is laid in a manger; and angels sing; and shepherds visit.

And as the Story seeps deep this night, we feel cynicism and fear draw back, and our world weariness dissipates, and there's a peacefulness that maybe we haven't felt for a long time. And we understand again how much we need this story.

For we dare believe again this Storied Night: that mercy is stronger than hate; that beauty and generosity and compassion matter; that forgiveness can change things; that prayer and song can heal the world; and that a baby named Jesus was born as sign and seal of God's ultimate will and scheme of love.

So we come here on this Holy Night hungering to hear it again: the Story of the journey to Bethlehem and of the stable birth; of the manger cradle and of angels proclaiming to shepherds that this Baby in the straw is the face of God's love for all.

And we so need this Story. It speaks especially to the mostly hidden away parts of ourselves: the bewildered, anxious, small feeling even scared parts of us can't quite believe that our lives matter at the end of the day or ultimately.

But then with this Holy, Storied Night, to shepherds, and to you and me, comes the good news of great joy...that with God each person is of ultimate significance and that no one...no one...is beyond the reach of an unconditional and eternal Love made known in this Christmas Child.

For with this Bethlehem Baby who grows up to be Christ in our lives, we see and know that we are not just the molecular accidents of a purposeless and hostile universe. But that our lives are important, sacred even, in God's timeless and transcendent design of life and love....

Tonight then, this Holy Night then, our souls know again our worth....

Tonight then, this Storied Night then, hope is reborn....

So, in the darkness of a Judean night, in the musty earthiness of an outback stable, midst flicking tails and shuffling hooves, with large, moist animal eyes watching, there is the panting of a young woman in labor.

In the distance a dog barks, a mouse scampers across the straw, the young woman pushes for all she is worth. A child is born and angels sing.

Tonight, gathered in all our flesh and blood, frail and wondering and beautiful humanity, this Story feels like the truest and most compelling thing we've ever heard.

So we look into one another's faces tonight and say the words, "Merry Christmas. Jesus is born."

And it is the blessing we have been so waiting to give and receive on this Holy Storied Night.