



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

God's Love Made Visible

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve (Year C)

Luke 2:1-20

Like many of your families, I suppose, bedtime stories around our house the last few weeks have taken us back to familiar ground. We've read the stories from our two Advent books which build toward this night, and we've also pulled out the others from our Christmas collection that we read from each year. We've heard again how "there's always room for a little one here," and how Hoshmakaka the old camel was as strong as 10 horses," and we've delighted again in the stories both familiar and deep, stories which have ushered us back to that stable so long ago—the stable where Mary gave birth to Jesus—the child who would one day walk on water and make whole and save us. And even if you're no longer reading from those books, I suspect somewhere in your mind is a deep memory of being read stories like those—or having read them to your children or grandchildren.

There is something magical about those simple stories drawn from Luke's account of Jesus' birth. When the shepherds rush toward the manger from the fields where their world had been shaken by the angels' news of a child's birth—a child who was to be the savior of the world—they find a couple whose world had also been turned upside down. As that master of understatement Luke puts it, Mary is pondering things in her heart, first wondering what sort of greeting the angel was bringing her as he shared the news that she would soon bear a child, and now as the shepherds tell her everything they've heard from the angels about her child, Mary again ponders it all in her heart.

And we've been doing the same ever since, haven't we? Pondering in our hearts what this amazing story is all about.

Whether you are hearing the story for the first time tonight, or whether you have heard it so often that it seems to live inside you, this story is worth pondering. On the surface, it's a simple story: a young Jewish woman and her husband, travel for days from Nazareth south to Bethlehem, outside of Jerusalem, because the Roman emperor had ordered a census. The young woman is pregnant; the journey is hard. When they arrive in Bethlehem, the inn is already full, so they spend the night in the stable. During the night, the woman gives birth to her son, and she and her husband wrap him tightly to keep him safe and warm and use the manger for his first cradle.

But if you scratch beneath the story much at all, we discover it's heart. This is a story about love. The love of a woman and a man for each other; their love for their child—a love they didn't even know was in their hearts until he was born, which I suspect some of you understand. And it is about the love that baby had, when he grew up—for his friends, his nation, his religion, his people—all sorts of people: insiders and outsiders, rich and poor, righteous and sinners, fishermen and lawyers and tax collectors and prostitutes. The story is about his strong love, which expressed itself finally when he gave away

his own life.

It is a kind of universal story, which people of strong faith and little faith and no faith at all somehow can understand.

Christian faith believes that what this story is really about is God and God's love. That's what God is like. That is how God's love comes into life: not in some dramatic display of heavenly pyrotechnics, not in high drama—the sky opening and trumpets playing fanfares—but in human birth and a mother's love and a baby's first cry.

There's a fairly unfamiliar Christmas hymn written by the great jazz pianist Dave Brubeck and his wife called *God's Love Made Visible*. Here's how that song describes what God is doing in Jesus Christ:

*God's love made visible! Incomprehensible! He is invincible! His love shall reign!
From love so bountiful, blessings uncountable
make death surmountable! His love shall reign!
Joyfully pray for peace and good will! All of our yearning he will fulfill.
Live in a loving way! Praise him for every day!
Open your hearts and pray. His love shall reign!*

*God gave his Son to us to dwell as one of us—
his blessing unto us! His love shall reign!
To him all honor bring, heaven and earth will sing,
praising our Lord and King! His love shall reign!
Open all doors this day of his birth, all of good will inherit the earth.
His star will always be guiding humanity throughout eternity! His love shall reign!*

Why would God choose to make his love visible in such a way? The answer, I think, is that God wants the world to be whole, and the best way to do that, God knows, is by changing human hearts and dispositions and attitudes—one by one by one. God seems to want to let each of us and all of us know that we are loved. That's what the story is about and that is why we have all crowded in here tonight and why millions and millions of people are sitting in churches all over the world tonight, singing carols, lighting candles, and listening to the story, pondering the great mystery of God's love for the world and—and even closer to home—God's love for me and for you, whoever you are.

God has a plan, and it is to make the world a kinder, better, more godly place by transforming you—maybe to save your life, maybe to give you your life back, maybe to give you the courage to live into your future facing whatever is ahead with grace—by telling you that you are loved, forever and ever. God's plan, I think, is that sometime on Christmas Eve, we will conclude that maybe the best thing that you and I can ever do, the best way to live the rest of our lives, is in that love, sharing it, spreading it around, reaching out to one another, across all the barriers that divide us. God's love made visible, in other words, in your life, in my life, in our life together.

God came into human history in the child lying in the manger. As we gather around

that manger tonight, I am reminded of some lines from a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

*All who at the manger
finally lay down
all power and honor,
all prestige,
all vanity,
all arrogance and self-will;
all who take their place
among the lowly
and let God alone be high;
all who see the glory of God
in the lowliness
of the child in the manger:
these are the ones who will truly celebrate Christmas.*

God comes to you and me personally in the story of Jesus' birth to tell each of us that we are loved with an unconditional and infinite love—and then to send us out into the night and Christmas Day and all the days that are ahead to live that amazing and wonderful love for the rest of our lives.

The late Howard Thurman, African American scholar, minister, poet, called it the “Work of Christmas.” He writes,

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers and sisters,
To make music in the heart. (The Mood of Christmas, p. 23)*

When the child was born in Bethlehem, a light appeared in human history. As the prophet put it, “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.”

We know what that means—to sit in darkness:

. . . an ongoing war and deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan; American service men and women, along with countless civilians, standing in harm's way

. . . an economy that has seemed to collapse in front of our eyes. Hard-earned savings, investments in the future, retirement and education funds, jobs, pensions, benefits

are gone. We are sitting in a kind of darkness this evening.

And every one of us is familiar with the darkness of personal loss and grief: the loss of a parent, a child, a beloved, a colleague, a dear friend—loss intensified by this season.

And so, whatever the darkness is for you this evening, I want you to know that there is light: a small, fragile light to be sure, but light that will not be overcome—ever; light that will dispel darkness, like the light of the small candles we will hold; the light of the love of God, the light of the world.

Long ago,
In the dark night, in a stable behind a crowded inn, a child was born.

In him was life—

And the life was the light of all people.

Thanks be to God.