What Can I Tell You?

Christmas Eve 2023 ~ St. Columba’s Episcopal Church

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Lo, I tell you a mystery in the story of this night. God so loved the world that God was born in human form, an infant fully divine, fully human. In Christ we are given God made flesh incarnate. From this we believe and have in truth born witness that Christ dwells in each and every child who comes into this world, that Christ is in me, in you, in them, in each and every one, those known to us and known to God alone. We rejoice this night in God’s love born anew into this aching, aching world.

When it comes to Christmas, there are things we know; there are truths that I can share, but there is much – most of it in fact – that I cannot know or tell. I’ll begin with the latter.

I cannot tell you how the shepherds felt when the angels filled the night sky, nor whence the angels had come before they appeared to those shepherds. I cannot tell you what happened to the sheep and the flocks; did the shepherds round them all up, herd them to that stable at the inn? Or leave them to graze, trusting they would neither stray nor be eaten? I cannot tell you how the animals responded and stirred, with a birth in their stable, the piercing cry of a newborn babe gulping at life. I cannot tell you how that young girl discovered within herself the courage, the strength or faith to persevere and say yes when every possible sane or reasonable answer would be no. I cannot tell you how the cosmos conspired to ignite a new star in the night sky, to shine brighter than all the others, to point the way for those who were wise, wise enough to seek and follow. I cannot tell you how any of these came to be.

I cannot tell you how this infant child can be fully human and fully divine, nor which parts are which. (We know this to be true of all infant children – so divine, so human, yet we cannot say how). Beyond the flight into Egypt, I cannot tell you how this child will survive the perils of Herod’s jealous wrath. Nor whether the Holy Spirit fell upon him in baptism or before. I cannot tell you how a simple call from this Christ – “Follow me” – had sufficient irresistible power to prompt grown women and men to abandon their families, their livelihood. Nor what holiness emanated from Christ’s very being that prompted the sick to reach out to grasp his garment; friends to tear open the roof of the house where Christ taught that their friend may be healed; for the centurion to trust Christ’s word alone would heal his child. I cannot tell you how deep the fear Christ’s very presence awoke in the leaders of all things institutional – the temple, the law, the civic authority. I cannot tell you how at his very word the water became wine and Lazarus rose from the dead. I cannot tell you how any of these stories of Christ’s life can possibly be.

Neither can I tell you how this newborn incarnate Christ can be incarnate in our lives. Or how our hands are also the very hands of Christ, how our love is the means for Christ’s love – to reach out and embrace the world. I cannot tell you how prayer works, whence it comes, where it goes. Neither can I tell you how perfect love casts out fear. I cannot tell you how it could be that each and every one of us is blessed with some gift solely our own to be discovered, shared, given. How it is that in the silence, in sabbath rest, we may sense within and around us the heartbeat of God, experience the fullness of God’s love poured out just for one like us. I cannot tell you how the resurrection managed to break the bonds of death and open to all the gates of life eternal.

Given all that I cannot tell, what on earth am I doing, here, in a pulpit with a microphone?! All I can say is this: Lo, I tell you a mystery. That unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; wonderful, counsellor, prince of peace.

Lo, I tell you that all of these things which have come to pass – the angels, the animals, the birth, the star, the healing, the teaching, the death and resurrection, the compassion, the justice of God. All of it is of God. All of it is set in motion, is born, this night.

I can tell you that Christ does not often show up where we most expect, nor in the person we ourselves might have chosen. I can tell you that Christ will ever upend our well-laid plans, our doctrines, rituals, and faulty institutions. I can tell you that Christ right now may or may not be found in the churches around the world who sing our hymns of Christmas joy. Yet I can tell you for sure that at this very hour Christ is incarnate in the prisons, the emergency rooms, the battle fields, at the barbed-wire borders, is close at hand for the desolate, and those who long to feel love; in the blood, sweat, and tears of mothers giving birth at this hour, and in the lightness of souls now departing.

I can tell you that Christ has an unquenchable thirst for truth and shall be found in the midst of our struggles and all the hard conversations right now, even in the places of deepest mistrust and polarity when people do earnestly strive for mercy and peace: In this nation, on our university campuses, in our divided congress, our divided families, in Palestine and Israel, in Ukraine. There, in the midst.

I can tell you that the love of God knows no end, that God will never rest until the captives are free, the refugees find a home, the dying are at peace, the oppressed receive dignity, the lost are found, the hungry fed. I can tell you that the love of God seeks out the lonely, the broken, the broken-hearted. I can tell you that the love of God inspires the hearts of peace-makers, opens the hearts of the merciful, comforts those who mourn, blesses the meek.

I can tell you that Christ is alive within every element of this glorious world God created; alive in love with the roaring sea and towering forests, with the hummingbird and grasshopper, the crustacean, the galaxies, and the night sky.

I can tell you that the Christ whose birth we celebrate this night, that very Christ is within you, that this very Christ is one of you, is each and every one of you. I can tell you that this story of the Christ is your story, that this is your story to tell – must be told! In words, yes, and more, in lives, through lives lived, in you and how you live your life. How you share, how you give, how you open yourself, how you forgive, comfort, love, rejoice; how you strive for justice, and give yourself for others. This is Christ incarnate in you.

Now, at the end, instead of telling, let me ask; let me wonder. I wonder how it is that others will experience in you the presence of Christ. Again: wonder how it is that others will experience in you the presence of Christ. What do you imagine, hope they will feel or experience in you that will open their hearts to the presence of Christ within you? I wonder. I wonder how it is that we will experience in others the presence of Christ, God’s love incarnate, in flesh, in them.

I wonder, when we depart from church this night, when our Christmas celebrations have come and gone, will others sense something different about us, a scent of fresh hay from the stable, a glow in our cheeks from the bright light of the star, a conviction and courage in our steps for justice, a child-like joy from loving that child.

Oh, my word, tis a most wondrous night. All these things have come to pass. And we have been blessed – by the presence of Christ born in the flesh of each and every one of us here together this Christmas night.

Merry Christmas!