

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Christmas Eve
Year A

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Text: John 1:1-5

Title: "Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam: Minding the Light"

One of the great gifts of being a Boy Scout is learning to live in the outdoors, honing the skills necessary to survive and thrive. When I was a Scout, every year our troop would plan what is called a Polar Bear Camp Out. It meant camping in the snow and learning we could actually survive outside in the winter. One year I remember being all excited about camping out in Trombley's woods. So far this winter, camping outdoors would be a snap. But the year we planned this Polar Bear campout, it was cold and there was snow on the ground. In preparation, I read in the Scout manual about how to make a holder for hamburgers in order to cook them over an open fire by weaving the patty between sticks, creating sort of a basket out of a y-shaped branch that held the burger tightly. After we hiked out to the woods, set up our tents and had a fire going for dinner, I made one. It looked great before I put it in the fire but there was a detail apparently I failed to notice in the manual. It was important to look for live branches that wouldn't burn well when you put the burger over the fire. Let's just say that's just one of the ways in which Scouts learn to enjoy the taste of ash in their food, at least this Scout learned it.

The other thing I learned on that particular camp out was the importance of tending the fire. Like I said, it was cold and our patrol agreed to take turns tending the fire all night thinking we would have some ambient heat in our tents if we kept it going. But again, it was cold, and somehow our discipline broke down as boys crawled into their sleeping bags to try and stay warm. The fire died. And the next morning, we learned that it dropped to eight below zero, which explained why most of us did not sleep very well on the cold ground with gear that was much too light for such a cold winter's night.

Although it doesn't get that cold in the part of the world in which Jesus was born, the carol writer reflected on the experience of those campers to whom it was first announced that Jesus was born.

*The First Noel, the Angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!*

Our angel in the field came in the form of Tom Burger, a nearby neighbor, who did not come to announce the birth of the king of Israel, but did come with a couple of gallons of hot chocolate and fresh donuts because he had heard how cold it was that night and he wanted to help, so he drove his truck out

to the woods bearing his gifts.

As a young boy I learned how important it is to tend the fire, to pay attention to the light, when it's cold. Without paying attention to it, the frigid air creeps in beneath the layers of clothing, through the insulation of boots and sleeping bag. Ignoring the fire leaves a person cold.

It's not a great stretch to understand that the same holds true for our spiritual lives. The world can be a cold place. People lose their jobs because the business plan doesn't make room for them anymore. Ages and stages of life often do not matter to those making such decisions. Being rejected by someone you thought had feelings for you leaves you feeling alone and isolated. It hurts. Sometimes the cold of illness—whether mental or physical—finds us shivering within, uncertain, afraid, lost. And losing someone to death whom you have loved can be a chilling experience of the soul. Not to mention the period of history in which we find ourselves confronted nearly every day with unexplained, random shootings or targeted loss of innocent life by those who want all of us to be afraid. Sometimes the world is a very cold place.

Yet, that is not as God intends it. The story of God's coming to us in the form of the Christ Child reveals the light of God, the warmth of God, in a cold world. Born in the time of Roman occupation, Joseph and Mary ordered by royal decree to travel to a place far from where they lived, Jesus finds himself born in a place filled with the smells of animals. Joseph and Mary doing the best they could to find accommodations. It was a harsh period of history, too, and if you looked for it, it wasn't difficult to see the world as a cold, cold place in which to raise a child. In fact, read the Gospel According to Matthew's account of Jesus birth and you'll find the Holy Family leaving Bethlehem and becoming refugees themselves as they ran to Egypt to avoid Herod's paranoia-induced killing of the innocents of Bethlehem. There were terrorists then too, evil dictators then, too. Just the names have been changed. So refugees are not new to our lifetime. According to Matthew's Gospel, the members of the Holy Family were refugees, too, fleeing a crazed dictator.

The good news of our story, the story we tell and hear tonight is the story of God's entry into the world to reveal God's love of the world. Notice the story isn't about God coming in the form of Herod, the guy who was thought to have all the power. Doesn't say anything about God coming as the emperor or as Quirinius—both of whom clearly had a great deal of power and who could take life with just a word.

What we have, though, are messengers of God spreading the word that God has come in a helpless, vulnerable, powerless infant—the light of the world, as the Gospel of John claims. If you are a parent or are close to a child, you know the joy—the light—a child brings. They don't have much power, not much to offer, just who they are, just their vulnerability and personality, but helpless as they are, they draw a kind of love that is impossible to fully describe. Ask a new parent or grandparent. They'll tell you or try to tell you. That is the kind of love God seeks from us because it's the kind of love God has for us.

I read the experience an Episcopalian colleague had as she took communion to home bound folks. She made her way to a nursing home and found Hazel. As she tells it...

...First I knelt with Hazel in the hallway outside the dining room at the nursing home which has been her residence these last several years. Next I caught up with Verina and her daughter in the lobby --- she was on her way to an appointment. Together we formed a quiet circle in that busy place and shared the

bread and wine together. Finally, I made my way to the other end of the nursing home to find Ruth sitting in her room. She complained of being cold, so we adjusted the two afghans wrapped around her as we tried to cover her feet as well.

Ruth is not always the easiest person for me to call on as her dementia makes it so that she doesn't seem to always remember me. Only I've been told Ruth had an amazing voice and so this time I thought to begin by asking her what her favorite Christmas Carols are. When she looked at me blankly I suggested, "How about "Away in a Manger?"" And Ruth, in a voice mostly untouched by her 99 years, began to sing this song I expect she has sung since she was a little girl.

*Away in a manger, no crib for his bed,
The little Lord Jesus, laid down his sweet head;
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.*

She didn't quite have all the words but you could hear in her voice her love of this story which still lives in her heart. From there, we went on to sing a few others until she paused and looked at me and said, 'You know, if I could have one more job, I would like to preach.' And so I asked, "What would you preach?" Pausing a moment she said, 'God loves you...and that's about it.' And then before we shared the sacrament we also sang "Jesus Loves Me."

God loves you... and that's about it.

It's easy to miss, this gentle presence and love of God, because what happens in life can so often be harsh and cold and because we have been conditioned to think of real strength and power in ways that are quite contrary to the power of Christ's love. We tend to think of those with real power standing on a debate stage before a national audience when God's power is really found in a nursing home in a helpless woman with dementia proclaiming the Good News of God's love. That's why it's so important to mind the light, to tend the fire, to remember to be open and aware that God's warm and strength comes from a different place, different values, different intentions than we so often find in the living of our lives. Pay attention to the light when you see it. It's easy to miss, but God is here, always, perpetually, even when we don't notice, just like the babe born in the midst of animals 20 centuries ago.

As Ruth's pastor put it:

*And so with Ruth this Christmas Eve, I offer the only message that really matters:
God loves you. And that is it. And that is everything.
May the blessings of Christmas be yours in abundance this year and always!*