

## Christmas Eve

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Every year, we read the Christmas story. And, by now, it's *so* predictable. There are shepherds, angels, and baby Jesus. It's not surprising that Jesus is born. It's just, expected. But, this year, I was struck by verse 19, that said "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." At first glance, it appears to be a sentimental statement, like when a parent fondly remembers a child's early years and the, now, lost simplicity. But, if we look at the Greek language in which this was originally written, what Mary is doing is literally throwing these words around in her head trying to figure out the significance.

You see, Mary was Jewish, annnd so was Jesus – shocker, I know. In Ancient Judaism, salvation was known in the birth of a child and not something granted after death. Salvation was given by being able to live on through the parent's new child. But, Jesus was not just for two people, instead the shepherds heard that the Savior was born for *all* people. This was an unusual statement, so this young girl who was about twelve-years-old had trouble understanding how her son was salvation for all people. Furthermore, I can imagine a bunch of working, smelly, shepherds showing up with their sheep into her birthing room to give her this message was a bit unusual. There

was a lot for Mary to ponder, and more than how to get the child to eat, sleep, and stop crying!

This odd moment would be a lot for anyone, but then on top of that Mary was told that her son would be the Messiah, that is the anointed one, the political leader who would rule over the Jewish people to bring about God's kingdom. She had probably watched the Romans torment others, and she knew that if her son would be a political leader there was going to be a long road of suffering ahead for him. So as this baby grew up, Mary tried to understand. She found him teaching in the temple at a young age. She saw him heal those who were sick in body, mind, and spirit. She watched his execution. And, after Jesus was gone, she gathered with the disciples to continue his work. Mary was there through it all. And, as she pondered, she came to learn and understand that this baby was God in human form, that is God incarnate.

Initially, the incarnation was foreign to Mary. You and I showed up here tonight knowing that Jesus was God in human form, but in Judaism God did not take on human form. In fact, to this day, Christianity is the only major monotheistic religion that believes that God literally takes on human form. It's a defining characteristic of our faith. As Christians, we believe that showing up matters. We don't have a God somewhere far, far away. Instead, our God takes on human form to come among us, and thus we give Jesus the title Immanuel, meaning "God with us."

That is the unique thing about Christianity – that is, bodies matter. The Christian faith is not a pursuit to escape our bodies to live in some other spiritual state. Instead, Christianity is about embracing, exploring, and enlivening our bodies to be fully who God created us to be.

Yet, you and I know that our bodies aren't always everything that we wish they could be. A new diagnosis and treatment can devour our bodies by making us feel anything but alive while chaining us to places we'd rather escape. As we age our bodies often grow larger, weaker, and more tired. After a traumatic experience we see how vulnerable our bodies are to mental, physical, and emotional pain. Our bodies are far from perfect, but our God sees the human experience centered in bodily presence.

Our God takes seriously the pain, dissatisfaction, and frustration that comes with our human bodies. Our God takes human physicality so seriously that God took on human form within a frustrating and beautiful body. But, in our God's true fashion, it wasn't an incarnation in a far-off distant place thousands of years ago. For, it would be a silly celebration today if we gathered to celebrate a baby that we'll never meet. So, that is where Mary's pondering, becomes our pondering. For, the incarnation is also about God's presence here in and now in bodily form.

You see, the presence of Christ is made manifest in each one of us. Christ is born when you acknowledge the humanity of a lonely person. Christ is born when you lovingly interact with friends, family, and those gathered here. Christ is born when we

support each other through the struggles of pregnancy, treatments, aging, and tragedy. Christ is born when we acknowledge the beautiful imperfections of our bodies that will never live up to the airbrushed advertisements. Christ is born here among us as we continue to make the vision of God come alive in our world.

And, the author of tonight's gospel reading from Luke will argue this very point. You see, the author of Luke is also the author of the book of Acts – it's a two-part series of sorts. And the point that the author will eventually make is that God and the expression of God in Christ is no longer fixed to one location, time, or situation, but rather Christ is born among us each and every day, in every place, and through all time.

Friends, there it is. That is the Christmas message. It's more than a long-ago event. Rather, Christmas is about continuing to notice the birth of Christ among us through other people. Tonight, and for always, you, me, and all of us together become the "body of Christ" fully born into this world. The "magic" of Christmas is found when we see the places where we can be the midwife for God. For, God will be present with or without us, but with God, we can make the process of seeing and experiencing Christ more palpable. So, as we show up at this table, we proclaim Christ's birth gathered within the imperfect bodies in this room. Together, as we sing Silent Night, we proclaim Christ's birth in all who strive for peace. And, as we go into

the world, we experience Christ's birth in acts of generosity, forgiveness, and love.

Thanks be to God for Christ's never-ending birth. Amen.