

Luke 2: 1-7 "Contradictions at Christmas" Rev. Janet Chapman 12/24/20 Christmas Eve 7 pm

I've been drawn to the work of Madeline L'Engle this season for her ability to put into words that which seems beyond words. In addressing the circumstances into which Jesus was born, she penned "That was no time for a child to be born; with the earth betrayed by war and hate; in a land in the crushing grip of Rome; honor and truth were trampled by scorn; Yet here did the Savior make his home. When is the time for love to be born? The inn is full on the planet earth, yet love still takes the risk of birth." When is a good time for a child to be born? Intentional or not, apparently 25% of Americans favor now as the time. As a possible result of stay-at-home orders and quarantines, OB/Gyns and maternity wards have seen a 20-25% increase in pregnancies and births. That is a significant increase and prompted me to remember going through that momentous birth process. Having gone through a miscarriage the first time, I was a bit more anxious about complications the second time. I lived by that book "What to Expect When You Are Expecting," often impatient with how long the whole pregnancy thing was drawn out. I looked forward to being a mother but was not very tolerant with the morning sickness, fatigue, aches and pains, and the uncertainty on just when and how that much-anticipated birth would occur. Part of me wonders if I had fully understood what to expect when I got into that delivery room, I'm not sure I would have gone through with it. You see I didn't have a smooth, easy delivery – it started on a Sunday afternoon and didn't end until early Tuesday morning. I received an epidural way too early on in the contractions and they stopped for several hours. We walked and walked up and down the hospital hallways trying to get things started again. By the time they did, I was too tired to push. I just wanted a nap, I was angry and discouraged. I told everyone today wasn't going to be the day and I was done.

The nurses disagreed for they knew the baby was coming and so they literally had to get on either side of me and push on my cervix. I remember the pain was excruciating and I vaguely remember the doctor saying, “she’s tearing flesh on both sides but the baby is coming.” I look back and am so grateful for the medical staff at that time. I can’t help but wonder how women did this for centuries basically on their own, none more so, than Mary.

Within the miracle of childbirth, Mary was confronted with the most difficult of conditions. It is only one of the many contradictions that bubble over in Jesus’ birth. Jesus was born in a borrowed room and put to sleep in an animal bed, yet this humble birth is announced by angelic messengers and a backup chorus of angels. Rough shepherds despised by society are chosen to hear and transmit this heavenly good news. Angels sing of peace and good will in a world where people fear the emperor and government. Beauty and hope break into a world dominated by hunger and fear. For some, it almost sounds like a fairy tale read to children before bedtime. It comes across as too good to be true as the promise of peace arrives at a time when people regularly find new reasons to hurt one another. The promise of good news comes to a world that resents immigrants and refugees. The promise of joy comes to a world where people are discouraged, angry, frustrated and just done. They have had enough and they want someone to change it. They want a savior who will fix things now, who will tell them what they want to hear and that he alone has the power to change it all. Scholar Lynn Japinga notes that “saviors” of all shapes and sizes proclaim the need for something different to happen immediately, but the problem is that what we need most, peace and goodwill and salvation, are long-term projects. In the birth of God’s child, God began the transformation of the world but the cross and resurrection do not complete God’s work. This isn’t a failure but the gradual way

God has chosen to work. God is on the move even now and is not yet finished. God sustains that long, slow process of transformation with signs of grace and glimmers of hope. In the words of the Christmas carol, “God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day.” That surprise of heaven can be seen in a supportive friend who bridges the social distancing to affirm their love and concern. It can come in kind words spoken into a toxic situation. It can be found in a Christmas gift for a child living in transitional housing like Francis Court or in a bag of cold-weather items given to nonhoused people in the midst of freezing weather.

We live during Christmastide and throughout the year in that tension between harsh reality and glimmers of hope. During my pregnancy, I remember being torn between the excitement of meeting my firstborn, the fear of not measuring up, and the reality of pain still to come. The light shines into the darkness but the reality is that there may only be enough light to see the next step. Joy hovers on the edge of pain. The already and the not yet, earth and heaven – all contradictions that are interwoven together in God’s mysterious realm. A stunning example of these contradictions is found in the first season of the award winning series *West Wing*, episode 10. Some of you may remember this political drama that ran from 1999-2006 about the inside life of staffers in the West Wing under a moderately progressive President played by Martin Sheen. In this particular episode, Toby Ziegler, White House Communications Director, learns that a homeless man was found frozen to death, wearing Toby’s old coat, just before Christmas. The man had served in the Korean War, so Toby arranges a burial with full military honors. The president observes that if word gets out about the funeral, all the homeless vets will come out of the woodwork, to which Toby responds, “I can only hope so.”

Meanwhile, the Executive Secretary to the President, Mrs. Landingham reveals that her twin sons were killed in Vietnam on Christmas Eve. She chooses to join Toby and the dead man's brother at the service in Arlington Cemetery. The final scene alternates between White House staff members listening to a children's choir sing "The Little Drummer Boy" and the funeral, where Toby and Mrs. Landingham flinch at the gun salute. The contrast is gripping as inside the grand White House, the birth of Jesus is celebrated with soft lighting and beautiful decorations while at the cemetery, a mother grieves her sons, dead for 30 years, a man grieves his brother, and White House staffer Toby grieves a system that permits a veteran to freeze to death alone on a park bench. The story becomes a symphony of contradictions. Into a world of disease, homelessness, loss of money and jobs, and increasing deaths, Love risks being born. Now is the time for the Christ Child to be born. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight. Amen.