

“Being Present in Darkness and Light”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

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Opening holiday mail this year, I was struck by how many challenges that people name, including illnesses, job loss, other personal struggles, and a general sense of apprehension about the times and the coming year. A friend’s annual letter begins, “life is complicated and hard, both on an individual level and communally”. One card mentions “the heaviness in the world” alongside their family pictures, and another testified to how “the world is beset by violence”. This one shows a family of five on the front, and inside the same family but made of Lego figurines. That card’s message: “May all of the bits and pieces come together... this holiday season.”

I appreciate the refreshing honesty in these sentiments. Because however much we may wish to put on a perfect family show with gauzy half-truths in holiday cards and social media posts, we are sometimes more “bits and pieces” than having it together. I’m counting how many here struggle with mental illness, chronic disease, yearning for life’s purpose, or have just had another tumultuous day. Even on Christmas, emotions flood with grief at loved ones lost, confusion at the suffering of loved ones, exhaustion at work that seldom ends, anger when cruelty is on display around the world, dismay at the climate change that gives us a Christmas Eve this warm, or despair when life seems to only move from one challenge to another. So many are only gathered now for worship by the grace of God, and there are others whom God’s grace will find *outside* of worship tonight. We are all sometimes just barely holding it together, or not. One more Christmas card showed several beautiful photos of the entire family, including one with all three children beaming at the camera. And there in the middle of the card in large font it says, “Our real life looks nothing like this.”

I think part of the truth is that it’s NEVER been a perfect time to be human, so we’re not somehow especially at fault for feeling at loose ends. The details are different for us—emerging from pandemic and economic trouble, wars around the world and unrest at home. But ours is the latest version of an age-old story where might makes right, people work hard but struggle to get ahead, the world is frequently unjust or uneven, those with power and money seek to keep it at the expense of others, while sickness and sorrow befall us all. This has been part of the human condition for millennia, including among the biblical shepherds, townspeople, and migrants Mary and Joseph. They lived this same foreboding darkness, or “bleakness” instead, as Dr. Wil Gafney would say, since not all darkness is bad. We can sometimes feel bleakness in life as a human being, and there’s comfort in being honest about that, even or especially at Christmas. “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight...”

The other part of the truth is that into just such human imperfection, God still comes. Alongside bleakness, sorrow, and despair, the Light of divine love enters in. It is precisely in times like these that the incarnation is such good news. The Rev. Rebecca Black, an Episcopal priest in Massachusetts, writes that when the Word became flesh and lived among us as a man named Jesus, “he placed his bed among our beds. He ate, and slept, got thirsty and tired. He made friends and lost them. He was admired, he was reviled, he was betrayed. Those who were there, those who saw him, touched him and were in turn touched by him and restored to life. Whatever we are or will be, we have always been the people whom God loved.”

The message of Christ born as Immanuel, “God with us”, is that invited or not invited, recognized or not, God chooses to be present alongside us—even *us*, here and now. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among *us*. That is the mystery of incarnation. Who’d have thought God would choose *us*? Who are

we that we should be caught up in anything so extraordinary and transcendent, when there are so many others with greater gifts, and stronger faith, and superior morals, and more patience with their families when they gather for the holidays, who are kinder to those on the other end of the political spectrum? Who are *we*, when we know so well our failures and shortcomings and limitations? God insists that none of that tells the whole story about us. Our brokenness and imperfection are not the end of the story. Somehow *we* are chosen by God to be part of something greater; we are born into a life that surpasses our ordinary existence. God chooses to be with *us*; despite everything, *us*. The greatest gift this season is God's presence with us—and our presence as the image of God with each other—in darkness and bleakness, extending hope and light.

Preacher Sarah West tells of “a church that was built way in the highest mountains of Switzerland. The old stone church was built without access to electricity. So when the faithful arrived at church they would light their lanterns and hang them around the church on pegs set in the walls, so the light would spread all around. If only a few people came to church the light would be very dim because there would only be a few lanterns. But when lots of people came to church there would be plenty of light. After the service the villagers would take their lanterns home. At this time, to those who watched from a distance, it was as if a stream of light poured out of the church and over the mountainside. For many it was a sign that all was well. God's light was with them and in them.”

May this holy night be filled with the light of God's presence, and when we leave this time of worship, may the knowledge of such gathered divine light flow through our actions and surround us ever after. In the words of the next hymn, “Christmas comes into the here and the now, through star-sighted people, the watchful and hopeful, who wake us to see a new world.” Amen.