

Love Is Here

Matthew 1:18-25

The scripture story we read today is so familiar to us because it is the Christmas story. We read it every year and we even have it in movies, songs and decorations. Yet, I always find myself asking: Do I really get it? Not just intellectually, but in my heart and in my life? Sometimes, I start thinking of how wonderful it is that God came to us as a human baby. Other times, I find myself interested in the details of the story and how Christians for a long time have fought over the virgin birth as the most important part of the story. As I asked myself about really getting the story, I was struck by two new insights. One is that the word for the birth of Jesus in Greek is "genesis" which echoes the story of creation. God in the birth of Jesus Christ was still creating the world and even bringing a new beginning.

The second insight is that the whole revelation to Joseph took place in a dream. I wonder how many of us would really pay such attention to our dreams. In Joseph's world, listening to God in a dream was not unusual. God has frequently made use of dreams in communicating to people. The most remarkable instances of this kind of revelation are recorded in the stories of Jacob and Laban, Joseph, Gideon, and Solomon. People knew how to listen to God through dreams. It is amazing that they had a sense of what was real in life even if it came to them through a dream. Joseph knew that Jesus was going to be Emmanuel, God with us, because of his vision in the dream.

Today, the message of God-with-Us sometimes cannot be heard in our "real" world. What we define as real, chokes out the sacred and mysterious.

--(*Beth walks in with a cart of potatoes*)

Roula: Hi Beth.

Beth: Hi.

Roula: I just started the sermon, so come on in and find a place to sit.

Beth: I am glad to be here. I just got done selling my coffee for the day, so I thought I should come, relax and enjoy worship.

Roula: We are glad that you are here, but if you got done so early, that means that you can still have some time to sell more coffee. I know that you don't make a lot of money. So, it would be good for you and your family if you went and did some more selling today.

Beth: Why should I do that?

Roula: Well, if you got more coffee and sold it today and did that every day then you would one day be able to buy a coffee cart in the mall. Then, if you kept that up, maybe one day you will be able to have your own coffee shop.

Beth: Wow! But what would happen then?

Roula: Then you might be able to hire some people and even buy another shop and hire more people to work for you.

Beth: What would I do then?

Roula: Oh then you will be able to have more free time to enjoy life, serve God and enjoy worship.

Beth (laughing): But that is exactly what I am doing right now.

This story helps us remember that sometimes we miss out on the real stuff of life when we think we are pursuing what is real. **In our modern, sophisticated, scientific, rational world**, is there a place for all this singing and reading and discussion of angels? In many quarters of the modern church there is a distinct prejudice against all things supernatural. Morton Kelsey, in a book called, [Dreams, A Way to Listen to God](#), asks the question, "Why has the modern church, for the most part, ceased to become a channel for humankind to experience the power of Christ?" Answering the question, Kelsey says, "The sad answer to this question is

that the Christian philosophies of the past three hundred years have overlooked the fact that God wants to come into contact with men and women and that they can actually know and experience God."

The whole mystery of the incarnation of the birth of Jesus Christ as God with us is not something that God intends for us to just hear about and know about in our minds. This is our story of God being right here with us for each one of us. The birth of Christ took place about 2000 years ago, but the same act of God's creation is happening right here among us. The question is not about whether God is with us or not, the question is about how we are able to receive God in our midst. Are we trained like Joseph to pay attention to when God speaks? Do we know our special way of receiving God's love in our lives? Do we talk to our children about this? Often times we are told to pray and things will just work themselves out. Or we are told to pray this way or that way. There are prayer formulas that are taught to us as children or as adults to help us on our path. However, what is often forgotten is that prayer or spiritual practices are about our relationship with God. If you want a relationship of love with God, then spiritual disciplines are necessary to grow. But instead of just reading books about disciplines, ask God. Pay attention. Where does God speak to you most often: in scripture, in nature, in relationships, in silences, in music, or whatever it is? You know in your inner self.

Samuel Miller, former Harvard University chaplain, once wrote, "Let your soul speak for itself. Some souls hold conversation with God in music, and some in the sowing of seed, and others in the smell of sawed wood, and still others in the affectionate understanding of their friends. Quit dressing yourself in someone else's piety. Untie your soul, give it some room to breathe, let it play, do not be ashamed of it. It is the child of the eternal and destined for greater things than you dream."

God's love is here for all of us. The Christ child has been born and is being reborn every day for every human heart. Part of our work is learning how to receive it. We have learned very well how to receive God in our minds, but we are still novices when it comes to our hearts and our spiritual journey. In fact for most of us, if we had a mystical experience of God's presence in our lives, we are afraid to share it for the fear of being dismissed as crazy. We want to make sure that God fits into our logical categories of doing and being because if we're honest, we don't want God to disrupt our lives too much. It is too risky, too foreign, too scary, too unpredictable. It might lead us to live our lives differently.

Yet, in various surveys, as many as 39% of people interviewed have reported having spiritual or mystical experiences where they experienced God in a personal way. Guess who the last person many of these people say they would tell about their experience? You got it -- their parish pastor or priest. Why? One woman answered, "They (the clergy) don't believe in that kind of thing."

A true story is told by a woman about her experience of God around the death of her brother:

On that morning, I knew my brother's time was very short. After sitting with him for four hours of very difficult breathing, I decided to call a chaplain. If not for Steve, then for myself. He had been incoherent all morning. I knew this was the end. His breaths were getting farther apart. The chaplain arrived within an hour. She was a great comfort. Her own brother was dying of cancer. She understood my pain. I told her about Steve's religious background, including his interest in the Bible the last few days. We went to Steve's room encircled his bed and said a prayer. I had told the chaplain earlier of a conversation I'd had with my cousin about how God could let this go on and on. It had been weeks of pain and suffering. Steve was totally disoriented during this time. It seemed so unfair. I asked the chaplain to pray for God to help him, and get rid of anything holding him here. She did this. She asked the Angels to come and protect him, and to show him his way to Heaven. I asked her to please read some verses from the Bible about Heaven and its beauty so Steve would not be afraid. I whispered in his ear to go with the Angels. As we sat with him, I looked out the window and saw five white birds flying above us; always staying together, two small and three large. They were beautiful. They looked like egrets, which are water birds. This was odd, since we were in the middle of a huge city with no water around. By now we had realized the birds were not out there before the chaplain had arrived. They never left for the next two hours until Steve passed away. It was then that we realized they were gone. We never saw them again. When I returned home, I was sitting on the floor in my bedroom looking through some pictures. I looked up at the picture my brother had just recently bought and had framed for me. There in the picture were the white birds.

The mystery of God's love is here through the birth of the Christ child. May we be open to experience this love even if it comes to us in a dream. Amen.