

When There Is No Room: Joy

Ancient Reading ~ Luke 2:8-15

There were shepherds in the area living in the fields keeping watch by turns over their flocks by night. And lo, an angel of God appeared to them, and the glory of God shown round about them, and they were very much afraid.

The angel said to them, “Fear Not! For behold, I bring you good news, good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a savior. Let this be a sign unto you: you’ll find an infant wrapped in simple cloth, and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the Highest. And on earth, peace, good will toward all.”

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass, which God has made known to us.”

Contemporary Reading ~ *adapted From ‘God Breaks In’ by Barbara Holmes in “Joy Unspeakable: The Contemplative Practices of the Black Church”*

We are told that Jesus hung out with publicans, tax collectors, and sinners. Perhaps during these sessions of music, laughter, food and fellowship, there were also moments when the love of God and mutual care and concern became the focus of their time together. Contemplation is not confined to designated and institutional sacred spaces. God breaks into nightclubs and Billie Holiday’s sultry torch songs; God tap dances with Bill Robinson and Savion Glover. And when Coltrane blew his horn, the angels paused to consider.

Some sacred spaces bear none of the expected characteristics. The fact that we prefer stained glass windows, pomp and circumstance has nothing to do with the sacred. It may seem as if the mysteries of divine-human reunion erupt in our lives when, in fact, the otherness of spiritual abiding is integral to the human interior (the heart space). On occasion, we turn our attention to this abiding presence and are startled. But it was (and is) always there.

Art can amplify the sacred and challenge the status quo. The arts help us to hear above the cacophony and pause in the midst of our multitasking. The arts engage a sacred frequency that is perforated with pauses. Artists learned that there were things too full for human tongues, too alive for articulation. You can dance and rhyme and sing it, you almost reach it in the high notes, but joy unspeakable is experience and sojourn, it is the ineffable within our reach.

When you least expect it, during the most mundane daily tasks, a shift of focus occurs. This shift bends us toward the universe, a cosmos of soul and spirit, bone and flesh, which constantly reaches toward divinity. Ecclesial organizations want to control access to this milieu. But they cannot.