Christmas Eve 2024

St. Brendan Episcopal Church

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

Every year, as the days grow shorter and October turns toward November, I begin making my Christmas cards in an effort to ponder the story of Jesus' birth not only in my head, but also in my heart and my hands, trying as best I can to see what the story of the incarnation might have to say in the midst of the complexities, the ambiguities, the fears and the anxieties of the time in which we live…

This year, as our difficult national election took center stage, **along with** the immense suffering in Ukraine, in the Middle East, in Gaza, in Darfur, in Sudan, in Haiti, **along with** natural disasters such as floods and fires, **along with** the health and relational challenges facing so many in our own communities and families, what I found I needed most to do was to tear paper and to create an image like the one you see on the front of your bulletin… a landscape of sorts with lots of rough edges, unclear boundaries, and cosmic upheaval… and in the midst of it all a star attached to a prismed heart by a single slender thread…

And inside the card a message that reads, "In the chaos, a slender thread of love… hold on," as well as a poem tucked inside that ends with the line, "Maybe we can hold on together."

As I worked on my Christmas cards, the image of a slender thread of love to hold onto in the midst of the chaos felt hopeful to me. And so I continued making them… almost 80 of them to be exact, including one for each family here in worship tonight…

But as I thought about that thread as something to hold onto, I remembered something we learned from Father Brent Was a few years ago…something related to the prayers we regularly pray on behalf of ourselves and others, as Father Brent Was admonished us to "Follow our prayers to where they lead us"… to "follow our prayers to where they lead us"…

And in remembering that word of wisdom it occurred to me that the slender thread of love on my card is not only for holding on to, but also for following, for allowing it to take us where it wants to lead us… As if to say, in the particularity of the mystery we ponder tonight…

A slender thread of love is ours

To hold as night descends

As chaos reigns and hope is frayed

And warring never ends.

A slender thread of love is ours

To hold amidst our grieving…

And look, that thread is beck'ning us

To follow where it's leading.

This night it leads us to a story

Of Love's most strange conceiving,

A tale to break all hearts apart

And open for receiving

So as to sense in this dark time

God's deepest, truest essence,

The infinite made intimate

In Love's down-ground-ward presence…

Tonight the slender thread of love leads us to a story… A story as told in the Gospel of Luke, although Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth as well, all be it quite differently, with wisemen instead of shepherds, a greater emphasis on Joseph, and details about Herod's plot to find and kill the baby who was said to be born king of the Jews…

Whether we read Luke's or Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, or, as we often do, whether we blend them together, the temptation is to sentimentalize the Christmas story until it's sweet and tame and under control, all the while its intention is to undermine our preconceived and limited understandings about the nature, the length, the width, the depth, the reach, the ferocity, the intimacy, the passion, and the ridiculous oddness of God…

It's a story that begs our attention not only of mind, but of heart and soul… A story that seeks to reveal things about the Sacred presence we call God that strain the limits of reason and intellect… Beginning with Luke's insistence that not only did God's full presence come in the babe in the manger, but at a particular time and place in human history…

As if to say God will not stay
Removed from God's creation,
But reveals God's self in time and place,
Enfleshed in incarnation.

And not in robes of finest kind,
Or in the halls of power and fame,
But at the margins of the world
Where strength goes by a different name.

Humble parents of humble lineage
Shaped by stories of God's shalom
Forced by Caesar to pay their homage,
Refugees long way from home…

In the terror of that time,
The story says God chose to dwell,
Coming down and in and with
So to be Emmanuel.

Come into a stable rude,
With those the world demeaned, reviled,

Rag-tag shepherds, foreign sages,

Love let loose, God's reach gone wild…

Following the thread of love

Into this story raw, untamed,

Will ask our hearts, our lives, our wills,

And nothing ever will be the same…

If we follow the slender thread of love to the story of Jesus' birth tonight, and if we take time to really ponder what we see there, we will find the wild child of God shattering all preconceived notions of who God is, and where God is, and how God is moving and being and rising in this world…

We will find God in the dung heap and on the margins… Not in some "holy heaven," removed from creation… Nor, aligned with the powerful of this world… But a God whose will it is for all of creation to live in harmony and well-being…

A God whose will it is, for the sake of the world's healing, in the words of the Magnificat, "to scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, to bring down the mighty from their thrones, to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things"… (No wonder the "Magnificat" was banned from all public reading in Guatemala in the 1980's during those most oppressive and violent years there)…

If we follow the slender thread of love to the story of Jesus' birth, we will find a God whose passion is justice, whose heart is mercy,

whose dream is liberation, whose joy is creation, and whose being is love…

A God who invites us to follow the thread into this story and to take part in its dawning, its unfolding… its beautiful, gracious, imaginative, full-bodied challenge to the world "as it is" for the sake of "what it can be" through the power of love… (All of which can lead to a good deal of trouble of course, if we actually "practice the things of God," which is why one of my pastor friends says we should hang a sign outside our churches that says, "Warning. Being a Christian can be hazardous to your health"… If by "health" we mean "wealth," staying intact, well-situated, sure-footed, clean and pristine)…

If following the slender thread of love to the story of Jesus' birth leads us to a certain way of being in the world, then before the "being" it leads us to a certain way of "seeing"… A way of seeing that is very hard for those of us who are well-educated, rational, practical and intellectually sophisticated…

A way of seeing reflected in words of the great civil rights leader Howard Thurman, who wrote,

There must be always remaining in everyone's life some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful… throwing all the rest of life into a new and creative relatedness, something that gathers up in itself all the freshets of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright white light of penetrating beauty and meaning – then passes. The commonplace is shot through with new glory; old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old, old hurting. A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are

trying to grow tall enough to wear. Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels."

When is the last time you heard the singing of angels?

We heard angels singing here at St. Brendan this past Sunday as we put on a Christmas pageant in the parish hall, with all of us 70-and-80-year-olds playing the parts of the characters in the Christmas story, while the three little girls of the congregation played the part of angels… Those three little angels getting up enough courage to sing all by themselves, to the tune of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star"…

We are angels from on high

Singing sweetly in the sky,

Singing songs of Jesus' birth

So all people here on earth

Hear the promise of God's love

Brought to them from heaven above.

We hadn't heard children sing at St. Brendan for a very long time… and there they were, dressed in white with silvery halos over their heads, singing of God's love in such a way so as to create a moment of breathless silence when their singing stopped… a moment pregnant with the wonder of it all… a space in the crassness, the hardness and the discords of life that opened our eyes to the possibility of the singing of angels…

And not just the three beautiful little angels of St. Brendan, but the other angels as well… the other ones that hovered in the St. Brendan parish hall this past Sunday morning… the ones none of us would ever dare talk about in polite company for fear of being thought crazy… The angels that break into our lives when we least expect them, throwing all the rest of life into a new and creative relatedness, and glowing in one bright white light of penetrating beauty and meaning…

Have you seen the stars lately? And the moon? Were you listening to Public Radio on Saturday morning when all of a sudden there came the sound of Marian Anderson singing the Christmas spiritual "Behold that Star" in her deep rich contralto voice?

Can I tell you about my 99-year-old father, who in his hospice bed opened his eyes in wonder two nights ago to see the porch railing strung with hundreds of white lights… thousands of white lights, thanks to his son-in-law Tom, and in the morning, a snowman in the backyard, built by a loving neighbor?

Can I tell you about my father's caregiver from Zambia named Tony... a tall beautiful man with a deep bass voice who, whenever my father is anxious and fearful has only to put his hand on my father's shoulder and say, "It's all right, Ken. Everything will be all right"… calming him down like no one else in the family can do… Tony, who is my angel Gabriel this year…

Did you know that our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters in the West Bank make angels from the pieces of glass left in the violence being waged upon them? Angels made from broken pieces of their lives…

If we follow the slender thread of love to the story of Jesus' birth, we will read of the singing of angels and of a strange bright star, a birth that defies all reason, and an unlikely cast of misfits and outsiders gathered to behold the oddest God anyone could ever imagine…

- A God whose dream is counter to the values of our world, geared as it is to profit and power…
- A God whose ways don't fit easily into our rational intellectually sophisticated lives…
- A God who, in a thousand manifestation of incarnation, is as close to us as the air we breathe (slender threads of love everywhere, free for the taking, the holding, the following), even if our lives are a royal mess and all hope seems gone…

This night God leads us to a story

Of Love's most strange conceiving,

A tale to break all hearts apart

And open for receiving,

So we will sense in this dark time

God's deepest, truest essence,

The infinite made intimate

In Love's down-ground-ward presence…

And in that seeing we will know

The thread of love from God's own heart,

Given us, free for the taking

So we might also take a part

In the story of a love so wild

It will come as a little child,

In the dark of this world bringing

Ah bright wings and angels singing.

Hold on, dear friends… Maybe we can hold on together.