

Christmas Eve 2025
St. Brendan Episcopal Church
Pastor Elaine Hewes

'Twas on that blessed holy night
When our dear Lord was born,
A man trudged on toward Bethlehem
Bereft and bent and worn,
From years of bondage, worn.

He held within his trembling hand
The symbol of his shame,
From ages past and miles gone by,
And Adam was his name.
Poor Adam was his name.

Before the kings and shepherds came
He came to see the child,
To place into his open hands
The apple once defiled.
In a garden once defiled.

He bent his knee before the babe

And bowed his weary head.

“I have no other gift but this

To give,” is what he said.

“My grief to give,” he said.

And into Jesus’ open hands

He put the apple scared;

A wound that told a tale of love

By fear and doubt once marred.

The love once whole was marred.

“My Lord, I know not what to do,”

Dear Adam said in pain.

“I only know that by Love’s power

Can brokenness be gain.

Can Eden be regained.”

So Jesus took the apple gift

And blessed it with a kiss.

And then three wondrous things he did

To right was amiss.

To mend the deep abyss.

He reached within the apple deep

And found within the star.

He flung it high into the heavens

For the wise men from afar,

So to follow from afar.

And then he took the seeds therein

And cast them on the snow

In trust that when the spring didst come

More apples they would grow.

Green shoots from death would grow.

Then last the apple he did break

In thanks and praise complete,

And give to all the manger guests

A Christmas feast to eat.

Even Adam he did eat.

And oh the joy that rang that night
From in the stable rude,
Across the miles, the hate, the fear,
For creation thus renewed.
By love and grace renewed.

'Twas on this blessed holy night
When our dear Lord was born
That by the power of Love's desire
Dear Adam was transformed
No more for shame to mourn.

All praise to God Creator then
And to the Son now given,
All praise to Spirit, bearing love
To earth from highest heaven,
To us from highest heaven...

Of course neither Matthew or Luke (the only two Gospel writers who tell the story of Jesus' birth) include Adam in their birth narratives. And it may seem sacrilegious to do so... to include the very person, who,

along with his partner Eve is oftentimes blamed for starting humankind on the slippery slope of sin...

And then on top of that to suggest that Adam brought as a gift to the Christ child the apple; the very symbol of his shame, which, as told in the fanciful story we just heard, Jesus took in his hands, kissed, blessed, and broke open, sending the star into the night sky for the kings to follow, scattering the seeds on the snow so to sprout and grow come spring, and sharing the fruit of the apple amongst all those gathered at the manger... even Adam, he did eat...

Really, it may seem an idea too crazy, a tale too far-fetched, an opening into the story too ridiculously open to consider on this most holy night when crazy, far-fetched and ridiculously open is not what we may be hoping for in the midst of a world where everything already feels crazy and disorienting, and we just want to hear the traditional story with the cast of characters we know and love...

But in truth, if we look closely, we will see that the whole of the Christmas story is filled with just such crazy, far-fetched and ridiculously open openings, some of them scandalously so, dangerously so, irrationally so, breath-takingly beautifully so... particularly as those openings open in the midst of a world intent on closing every door, window, eye, mind and heart in its effort to

- benefit the powerful,
- to marginalize the vulnerable,
- to manipulate the controllable,
- and to insist on the "rational"...

The thing is, the time and place in which Jesus was born was a world full of such closed doors... And what I want to suggest is that the story of his birth, if we see it in its deepest truth and its wildest wonder, offers us the presence of openings every bit as crazy, far-fetched and ridiculously open as the idea of Adam and his apple being received by the baby Jesus with grace and love...

Because look...

- In the political world of the Roman Empire, where Mary and Joseph would have been deemed insignificant nobodies, **the story opens before us** an alternative vision, a totally different possibility, in which Mary and Joseph are the ones who have the most important part to play in the dawning of God's kingdom as they say yes to bearing and caring for the infant Jesus... **The ones who have no power as the world understands that word...**
- **And** in the 1st century religious world of rigid legal regulations insuring strict lines of demarcation between "clean" and "unclean," "moral" and "immoral," those "chosen of God" and those "not-chosen of God," **the story opens before us** an alternative vision... a totally different possibility, in which the shepherds (included in Luke's Gospel), known for their unclean, immoral, and unsavory ways, and the Wisemen (included in Matthew's Gospel), known for their strange and foreign beliefs tethered to stars and astrology and cosmic signs in the heavens... **These are the ones who come to the manger and recognize in the Christ Child the fullness of God...**
- **And** in the "real" world of every time, including the world into which Jesus was born, where kings, tyrants, religious gate-keepers and financial "bean counters" insist on the "rational," the "literal,"

the “predictable” and the “controllable,” **the story of Jesus’ birth opens before us** an alternative vision, a totally different possibility, in which angels and stars and dreams and sacred conceptions of every kind invite us see beneath the surface of the story... all the way to that place where the deeper truths live and move and have their being...

All the way to that place poet Wendell Berry speaks of in his poem entitled, “Remembering that it Happened Once” when he writes about going out to his barn toward one long night’s end to do chores, opening the door, and seeing there *“the Christ child bedded in straw,/ the mother kneeling over Him,/ the husband standing in belief/ He scarcely can believe”*.... The air and light around them *“joyful as a choir”*.... *“We stand with one hand on the door,”* writes Wendell Berry, *“Looking into another world that is this world... And we are here/ As we have never been before,/ Sighted as not before, our place/ Holy, though we knew it not.”*

Or like that deeper place about which poet Ted Kooser writes, who, in his poem “Christmas Mail,” suggests that the rural mail carrier in his home state of Nebraska, driving the snowy roads, hears from the bundles she is carrying, *“the plaintive bleating of sheep,/ the shuffle of sandals,/ the clapping of camels”*... The poet then saying that at stop after stop the rural mail carrier *“opens the little tin door/ and places deep in the shadows/ the shepherds and wise men”* as well as an assortment of other manger animals... Her way over the snowy roads being led by the Styrofoam cup, *“white as a star”* perched on her

dashboard from which there comes *“a hint of hazelnut,/ and then a touch of myrrh.”*

Both of these poets, just like the Christmas story itself, helping us to see beneath the surface of the story... all the way to that place where the deeper truths live and move and have their being... and opening for us an alternative vision, a totally different possibility than those dictated by the kings, the tyrants, the religious gate-keepers and the financial “bean counters” ...

As if to say...

Amidst the doors closed shut and tight

By narrow vision, muscled might

There always is for us to see

A different possibility

Inside this world,

another singing, moving, rising,

forever bringing

a power to bear that opens, opens,

Love its sign and surest token.

Of all the openings the Christmas story opens, this is the most ridiculously open perhaps... the most scandalous and dangerous, the

most irrational and breath-taking... **This opening that opens the eyes of our hearts to see inside this dark and suffering world in which we live, another one...**

A world in which the fullness of God, the infinite expansiveness of love, is made finite, tangible, real in the most unexpected, irrational and scandalous of ways; as the Christmas story tells it, in a baby born in a shoddy manger stall to two no-count parents on the margins of the Roman Empire... a baby who will spend the rest of his life making the expansiveness of that infinite love finite through acts of mercy, justice, reconciliation, compassion and peace until the kings, the tyrants, the religious gate-keepers and the bean-counters can't stand it anymore...

But, what I want to suggest is that the Christmas story, inside its deepest truth and wildest wonder opens before us the possibility that the fullness of God, the infinite expansiveness of Love **is also made finite and visceral and real in a thousand thousand other times and places, even in the shoddy, marginal, ordinary, fear-filled moments of our own lives...**

Love always its sign and surest token...

And inviting us to see in the thousand openings of our ordinary days, something like what Wendell Berry saw in his barn that one long night's end, when opening the door, he saw "*another world that is this world... Holy, though he had known it not*"... **Love its sign and surest token...**

Or something like what poet Ted Kooser saw when he imagined the rural mail carrier delivering mail on a snowy day in Nebraska

opening *“the little tin door of each mail box,/ and place deep in the shadows/ the shepherds and wise men...* the Styrofoam cup on her dashboard being the star that led her, with its hint of hazelnut, and a touch of myrrh... Another world inside this one, **love its sign and surest token...**

Or something like the audience gathered last Saturday evening in Blue Hill saw as a women’s acapella group from Sweden blended their extraordinary harmonies on the Winter Solstice; the longest night of the year... It was stunningly beautiful, and everyone in the audience was in rapt attention as the women sang... But at one point one of the singers addressed the audience, not through singing, but simply by talking to us... acknowledging the suffering, the animosity, and the despair infecting the world in this present moment... Admitting knowing that despair herself, and acknowledging that many of us in the audience probably knew that same feeling...

And then saying that in the midst of all this sadness and suffering, she knew there was something else... “There’s beauty,” she said... “and music and connections between every living being and every part of creation... and there’s this moment, and there’s kindness, and gratitude and the sky full of stars...”

And as she was speaking, I felt something in the room **open before us...** Something everyone in the room, including me, leaned into with all of our beings... an alternative vision... a totally different possibility ... a world inside this one over which the kings, the tyrants, the religious gate-keepers and the bean-counters have no power whatsoever...

Love its sign and surest token.

This is the story of Christmas... a story of a Love, God's love, that will not stay in some celestial heights far removed from our suffering despair... A story that opens opens before us **in the very times and places in which we live**, a alternative vision, a different possibility.... Another world inside this one where this love lives and moves and has its being

- in such low-down marginal places and among such no-count powerless people **it's scandalous...**
- and in such an affront to the kings, the tyrants, the religious gate-keepers and the bean-counters of the world **it's dangerous...**
- and in such a breath-takingly irrational and beautiful way it's... **(silence)....** breaking open our eyes and minds and hearts to see that we too are welcome into the expansive reach of that love... that we too can come to the manger, carrying with us the apple of our regret, our brokenness, our fear and shame, trusting that the Love of God, born in Jesus into every dark time and place... into every here and every now, will, by the power of that love, bless the gift we have brought, no matter how marred... and then, breaking it open, will make of its broken pieces stars to light the way, seeds to grow come spring, and food to share with all creatures under heaven... Even Adam, he will eat... Even you and I will eat...

This is the promise of this night as we ponder the mystery of Jesus' birth; Emmanuel, God with us in the most unexpected, far-fetched and crazy of ways... And what I would hope for each of us is that

the love carried in this child would open in us the possibility that we too could go out to our barn one long night's end, and opening the door to the animals and Mary and Joseph and the baby, see "*another world that is this world... Holy, though we had known it not*"... **Love its sign and surest token...**

And we too, traveling over the snowy roads with Christmas gifts for our loved ones, might hear in those bundles "*the plaintive bleating of sheep,/ the shuffle of sandals,/ the clopping of camels*"... And perhaps, from the Styrofoam cup sitting on the dashboard, leading us like a star, might catch a hint of hazelnut, touched with myrrh...

Another world inside this one, **love its sign and surest token...**