

Christmas Message 2019

Rev. John Allen

God shows up.

That is the heart of this ancient, mysterious story.

God shows up.

The people whose live in life's shadows. On them, light has shined.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting One, the Prince of Peace.

We tell this story year after year not just to remember this thing that happened long ago in Bethlehem. Not just to remember what God has done for us, or how God once came into our lives and our world.

We tell this story year after year to witness this thing that happens still. To see what God is doing for us, to awaken to how God is coming into our lives and our world today.

God shows up.

They needed it then. People have always needed it. We need it now.

It does not take a stretch of the imagination to know the shadows in our lives and our world. The broken things. The fearful things. The old, dull hurts, and the sharp fresh ones.

The uncertainty of what comes next.

A broken heart, or grieving soul.

We don't have to work hard to remind ourselves of those things. You are probably thinking about one now.

What does take a feat of imagination is to see how God could arrive in the midst of it.

To believe that light can shine into life's shadows.

We of course have our fantasies. That we wake up one morning and things are back to the way they used to be. Or the disease is just suddenly gone. Or a resentment vanishes on its own and a relationship is restored.

Social fractures are mended. And all of a sudden everyone sees the world exactly the way we do.

But as soon as those hopes pop into our heads, they are accompanied by the crushing realization of just how unlikely they are to actually come to pass.

Those kind of miraculous and sudden transformations are quite frankly vanishingly rare.

And yet that is our most ready image for what it would look like for God to show up. We would have no difficulty noticing the hand of God in such a miracle.

When I talk to people who struggle to believe in God, one of the things i hear most frequently is that the very state of the world itself is evidence against the existence of God. And even those of us whose faith may be more sure, still I think, can feel haunted by divine absence each day our lives, or the direction of the world, doesn't suddenly turn on its heels toward something beautiful and peaceful.

It is hard for us to see God's presence in history, when we don't see world-altering miracles.

So how is God actually present in the world? How is God actually at work in our lives and in the course of human history?

Tonight's story offers us an image.

A newborn baby, born to poor parents, out in a barn because there was no room in the inn. The seeds of a new creation, planted among a sleeping world that scarcely noticed. Save for a few foreign astrologers and a pack of unruly shepherds from a nearby hill.

The rest slept through the angels songs, and awoke to a world that they were certain was the one they fell asleep in.

But it wasn't.

Heaven had touched Earth. And God had come to live with us.

The hope of the world was now nascent in a wriggling newborn, in the strong but nervous arms of a new mom.

That is how God shows up. Not in a thundering cloud, but on a silent night. Not in power and glory, but in vulnerability and dependancy.

Not changing everything all at once. But nudging the world in a new direction. Unnoticed. Planting the seed of salvation in the cold hard earth.

And that is how God is showing up for you, and for us. Tonight.

It is happening when you least expect. It is not going to turn out the way you imagined. It is happening in a place you have maybe never heard of.

It is the kind of thing you never even imagined you would want or need. Something as strange as a baby in a barn.

But it is the hope you have been seeking. The presence for which you have hoped and hungered.

God. With us.

Our work on Christmas is to let go of our own idea of what the future must be, and how God must act.

And to look for a star that is hanging over some out of the way place.

Or turn our hears heavenward and wonder if what we are hearing might be the beaconing song of angels.

The heart of this ancient, mysterious story is this: God shows up. God shows up to plant in our world seeds of transformation and hope. To drop into our midst the one thing that might change everything.

God shows up.

But maybe. Actually, probably. In a way that you never imagined.