

Sermon: "And So, It Begins"

Christmas Eve, 2018

Center Church, Hartford

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

(Turning out all lights, leaving only candles.)

Shh, we did this on purpose. Everything's fine.

Or maybe everything is not fine. It wasn't when Jesus was born, either, you know.

(Shines flashlight on creche)

Which is actually the point. That's why he was born, because things were most certainly not all right for the vast majority of people in the world. As one wise person wrote, "The birth is not a romantic wonder; it's a chancy rescue mission." And chancy it was, because not long after Jesus was born his parents were forced to flee, becoming undocumented refugees in Egypt because Jesus' life and their lives were threatened by the King. Like the refugees fleeing Syria or Central America carrying their children with them, Mary and Joseph weren't sure they were going to make it.

The whole story of God coming into the world in Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, seems utterly crazy and its success, then and now, teeters on the edge of disaster. If you want to change the world, you would think you would do something really big, if you were God that is. Think the Great Flood, for example, in Noah's time. If you're going to mount a rescue mission for human beings and the planet Earth, you'd think you'd call in the angel hosts to do more than sing a little Gloria to some shepherds.

But God decided on a different path, because the big cosmic flood hadn't done the trick, and this time God started small, with the glowing face and tiny body of a baby. He was supposed to be the Light of the World, but baby Jesus barely had the wattage of a single candle, or a small jewel. *(Shines light on jewel)*

(Starts to bring lights up, slowly while she speaks. Kaitlyn Thomas begins to draw)

You have to start somewhere. Today, I sing in praise of the small, the faint light, the flickering hope, and God's power to bring it all to wonder.

The somewhere God started, we are told, was a small town with a proud history, not unlike many of our New England towns. Bethlehem, House of Bread, birthplace of the great King David.

The someone(s) were a carpenter and a young woman, not yet married but about to be parents, like so many people today. Neither famous nor powerful, but small in the eyes of the world.

Then, the baby. Talk about small. He didn't look like a superhero. He did everything babies do. He nursed at his mother's breast, he slept, he filled whatever they used as diapers, he cried when he was hungry or sick or lonely.

So far it does not seem promising, this rescue mission.

But, as one translation puts it, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." That's how God works, often choosing people and places to carry the message that don't have star power or loads of money. Rarely does God make the cosmic gesture; more often, God moves into the neighborhood and works with what is there.

God sees something in the neighbors they don't see in themselves. Better yet, God enhances the small gifts already there with the quirky, unpredictable, enlivening, beautiful Spirit: wind and flame and Gloria in the highest!

Now, after the bright star streaking across the sky and the angels visiting the shepherds and the travelers from the East bearing gifts, very little happened for the next 30 years! Jesus grew up. God plays the long game, and when it seems like God is doing nothing, that's often when seeds planted are growing, when small sparks are being fanned into flames, and what seems an eternity to us is a breath of a second to God.

After 30 years, Jesus. Life, death, resurrection, disciples spreading the story and the way of life, the way of love, the hope of peace, the joy of deep connection with God, the unpredictable and powerful Spirit blowing change into a world so violent, with people so full of hate, that progress is slow.

What seems an eternity to us is a breath of a second to God. For us, that this has gone on more than 2000 years and might indicate that the Jesus project an epic failure.

It's not.

2000 plus years later, we are here. The dream has not died; the light has not gone out; the love has not been killed by the hate. Think of it this way, by the way God measures time, we are still in the beginning of God's Jesus project, and we carry the hope into the future, in the same way that Mary and Joseph did on the journeys to Bethlehem and Egypt. We carry the hope into the future in the same way as the shepherds who told others that God had not abandoned us but loved us so much as to come in person. We carry the hope in the same way as the Wise Men who defied the powerful ruler to place love and life above politics and privilege.

We may be small, but we carry hope, and we are continuing the beginning of God's vision of the realm where "Love one another as I have loved you" is the rule above all rules.

You, you are the little gems, the small lights that God makes beautiful and powerful, the unlikely descendants of the unlikely disciples across millennia. We fail as often as we succeed, just as they did, in living in love.

Keep on trying. The picture of your life, the picture of humankind on this earth, is not yet finished. Don't despair. "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us to give light to those who sit in the shadow of death." "What came into being in Jesus was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, which cannot put it out."

In a few minutes we are each going to hold one of these small, cheap, basic, not fancy candles. We are going to light them, and then something utterly magic is going to happen. This place will glow. There will be more light in here than we would think possible just looking at these little candles. That moment is not the ending, either of this service, or of Christmas. In fact, Christmas Day is not the ending of a season, no matter what the store displays indicate, but the continuation, each year we remember it, of the Jesus project of love. It's a reminder, and a push, for we can shine more light than we think, and we need to be about it! (*Scatters gems*)

Tonight's not the end, nor is tomorrow morning. It is again and again the project going on and on. Kaitlyn's painting will remain unfinished, but it has been started. You will be given a little gem when you leave so you can start your own painting of your part in this story. What unexpected beauty and powerful love will grow from the gem of Spirit God has placed in your heart this year? It begins again tonight. God moves into the neighborhood to meet us. The rescue mission continues. Are you ready to shine? Amen.