

Christmas Eve C

Luke 2:1-20

Dec. 24, 2009

To see them there

I see them there, in the back corner of the old red barn.

A half dozen cows stamp their feet, impatient to be milked, their necks through the worn wooden stanchions, heads pulling at the hay as they feed from a trough.

Their breath hangs in the frozen air, warm and sweet as summer clover. They glance over their thick shoulders as we pass and prepare for the milking.

I am too young for this work, so I watch my uncle in the old barn that once was ours before my father got sick and had to surrender this place.

I steal away to the back corner where bales of hay are stacked like a wall and cats prowl, listening for the rustle of mice burrowing in the bales.

It's here that I see them. The man and the woman, startled at my approach, thinking they were alone in this place. Their eyes open wide in apprehension, wondering what has happened to them that they must take shelter in this place, fearing I will expose their presence.

There is no need for fear, for all I want is to watch. Their eyes return to the worn wooden box we throw in the barnyard and fill with feed. A child lies there, amid straw pulled from the bales.

The woman takes the child and fusses with the cloths, wrapping the child securely from the cold that filters between the cracks between warped barn boards.

She swaddles the child, covering every bit of tender flesh but his face, and it is then, watching her, that I see.

I see that the appearance of God in human flesh stirs no fear or trembling. The Holy One comes, vulnerable and in need of the love only human hearts can provide.

I see ... the desire of God has nothing to do with parading power or making me feel small or sinful or ugly or insignificant. At the manger, it is clear the Holy Mystery, who is the fountain of all life, hungers not for my fear but for my love.

God wants me to tenderly pick up the child and swaddle this life, feeling within the stirring of the same love which moves the Holy One to love me. I watch, and I see.

I see that God wants me. I see that none of us know God; no one knows God's heart, not until we know Him as the child in the manger, seeking to be swaddled and tenderly held in our hearts.

This I see, and outside the old barn, ancient stars glisten on frozen fields that slope a half mile down to the thin strip of gravel called Pea Ridge Road. Across the road, the ridge rises several hundred feet, and the wind through the trees that stand on top sounds like singing, the voice of angels.

II

Seeing the scene in the places of my life, the old story feels fresh as winter breeze. And the angels' song from atop Pea Ridge makes all the sense in the world: "Glory to God in highest heaven, and on earth peace to those he favors"

At the manger, with this child, God declares peace, not war. No thundering sermons of loud obnoxious preachers are heard here. No accusing fingers. No shattering earthquakes.

No exploding volcanoes. No consuming fires. No Charlton Heston bearing stone tablets engraved by angry god whose voice makes us shiver in fear. None of that here.

God appears, pouring the Love God is into this child, an offering of peace, an invitation to friendship.

The angel's message to the shepherds, tells us everything we need to know. "Don't be afraid." You need never be afraid again. Ever." He should have saved his breath.

No command can still the shepherd's fears ... or yours. Go ahead, command yourself not to be afraid. Command the fear of one who is dear to your heart. Tell their fears to go and not return. It does no good. We cannot be talked out of fears.

We can only be loved out of them.

That's what happens for the shepherds. "Let's go and see," they say. They run across frozen fields under the starlight to the old barn to see what's happening.

Join them. Gather your hopes and fears. Take the ache at the pit of your stomach for something you can't quite name. Take the fragmented pieces of your life you can't put together in way that satisfies your desire for a life that is truly human and happy.

Take your feeling of being lost and needy. Take your restless desire to know a great love that will always be enough in every need. Take your fears of life and death. Take that sinking feeling that your life will never be what you want and need it to be

Take it all, and go see the child, there in the barn.

The shepherds, confused and shy, slowly draw near, not knowing how close they may come or whether they are welcome.

Stand among them on hesitant feet. Come to the manger. See the child who stirs the hope that the ache in your heart can find healing.

Come and see: In this child, God comes to you, welcoming your humanity. God comes seeking to awaken in you the love that is in the child ... for you. For you.

III

This night ... in the back corner of the old barn, by bales of hay, a mother swaddles a child and lays him in a feedbox.

It's time to come in from the cold. Any place away from him is cold. Come and sit in the warmth. Watch, until you see ... the love with which you are loved. Come, feel the love he awakens.

Your fears will melt, and he will save you from all that is not love, from yourself and all your fears, pouring love on each of your dyings, until there is nothing left of you, but life.

It will be a long year before we gather here again and read this story. Much will happen. Not all of it will be happy.

But through the year we will see the child we hold close this night. Wherever, whenever love is seen and awakened in our hearts, he will be born again ... in us.

And each time, if we listen, we will hear the trees singing, the song of the angels.