

Gospel - Mathew 1: 18-25

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sermon 12.22.19

Peggy Hosford



Good morning and may peace be upon all of you during this blessed season.

I recently finished reading a delightful book, called *Olive, Again* by Elizabeth Strout. I can relate to this character Olive Kitteridge because she is older like me and sometimes a little outspoken and doesn't always fit in. At the end of this book, when she is nearing the end of her life, she is writing about her life experiences and says "I do not have a clue who I have been. Truthfully, I do not understand a thing." I don't know about all of you, but I can definitely relate to what she is saying. The older we get, the more we know that we don't know much. And the more we can let go of knowing and surrender to not knowing the more we can be ready to receive God into our hearts. We do not know, but God does! And recognizing this is part of the wonder of this season of Advent. We are truly fumbling around in the darkness, waiting for the light of the Christ child to show us the way.

We are in the midst of yet another busy Christmas season. I shared previously how crazy I used to be during Christmas with all the preparations for a perfect Christmas according to Peggy Hosford, designed to outdo even the best Hallmark Christmas. Well you can guess how that usually turned out. Everyone a little frazzled and cranky and forgetting the why of it all.

And yet, through it all, there was always the thread of love and beauty that would shine through at the most unexpected times. There are so many wonderful memories of holiday times with family, my father's beautiful home made wooden toys, the delicious food, the beautiful music, and for my children there was a surprise visit from a family friend who dressed up as Santa and showed up on our doorstep the day before Christmas. Then there was the year that my newborn daughter was Jesus in the nativity at church and her older sister got to be Mary. And there was the gift from my parents of a beautiful hand painted nativity made from pieces of driftwood by a family friend which I still carefully set out each year.

Yet I am painfully aware that for many people, there are not the happy Christmas memories. There are many who do not have enough money even to pay the rent, much less buy gifts. And there are families ravaged by alcoholism and drug addiction or violence. And there are refugees suffering at our border and all around the world. And we live in a culture that has gone mad over the acquisition of more stuff, which is most apparent during this season of giving. Storage units are one of the fastest growing businesses in America, and a trip to the landfill will show you where a lot of our plastic toys end up. But still we want more. We trample each other racing to sales on Black Friday, and many of us rack up credit card debts that we cannot pay off before next season. It is as if we are trying to fill a big void in our hearts with more stuff, more activities, more lights, more food, more everything, and at no time is this more apparent than during the Christmas season. When we get so crazy and busy making our lists of things to do and things to buy, we forget we need to just be still to hear God's message.

And what is this message? Today's gospel is one of two accounts of Jesus' birth. In this account of Matthew's

the emphasis is on Joseph and his obedience to God when the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and tells him "Do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. She will have a son and you will name him Jesus. Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, "A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel" (which means God is with us). This is the message, GOD IS WITH US! In our world today, with our reliance on science and rational thinking over spiritual truths, there are those who ask, "How can you believe a story like that?" To these people I would say, "This is our story, and sometimes, to quote the writer Barry Lopez, a person needs a story more than food to stay alive." We as Christians, need this story. We need to know that God is coming, God is with us. Furthermore, this sad and broken world needs this story, now more than ever. God is with us, Love is with us, and this is indeed a miracle. The miracle of Love.

So how do we come to know this love? We sit quietly in the dark and wait to know God's presence. We ask God to sit with us. As I have gotten older, this time of sitting has become more and more precious to me. I appreciate the quiet beauty of the dark mornings as we near the winter solstice. I think about what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph, sitting in the dark in the manger waiting for the birth of their son. Their world was so much quieter and darker than ours. I remember some of the few times in my life when I have sat in absolute darkness. I remember especially one time when I was backpacking in the mountains and it was a rainy and moonless night. We slept in an old three sided shelter and listened to the raining softly falling on the cedar shingles, not able to see even our hands in front of our faces. It was a peaceful time, but a little scary too. We are so used to the distractions of noise and light. And we have come to associate light with God and all that is good, and darkness with the evil in the world. But we need to remember that God created both night and day, in order to show the time when days, years, and religious festivals begin. Both the light and the darkness come from God, and we need both. We need to know the darkness in order to see the light.

So I sit in the darkness and I ask God to prepare my heart to receive my Lord again. I can bring my broken and hidden places to God. He knows all my flaws and loves me as I am. I can rest assured that the pure love of Christ will touch me in my darkest places, and I will be healed. I can send the love in my own heart to others who are feeling sad or forgotten and deepen my connection to all of God's children. And I can ask God to show me the way, to show me how to help others who need help and healing.

I would like to close by sharing Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's Christmas message in which he says,

" It's not an accident that long ago, followers of Jesus began to commemorate his birth, his coming into the world. When the world seemed darkest. When hope seemed to be dashed on the altar of reality. It is not an accident that we too, commemorate his coming, when things do not always look right in this world.

But there is a God. And there is Jesus. And even in the darkest night, that light once shined and will shine still. His way of love is the way of life. It is the light of the world. And the light of that love shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not, cannot, and will not overcome it."

So let us rejoice in this message of hope. Let us love ourselves and each other. Let us remember that we are truly blessed. The light of God's love is a miracle that is always with us, shining in every one of us and in everything around us. We just need to remember to look at the world with the eye of our hearts.

May God bless you in this beautiful season and always, Amen.