

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Vulnerable Gift”

Heading into our six Christmas Eve worship services folks asked me, Katya, and members of our church staff if we were ready. Underneath this question was their concern for us but I also think they wondered whether or not we who care for our building, or manage logistics, or design and lead worship would be able to hold up. Everyone knew the day before Christmas was going to be a long one around here and it was. Part of the good news is we did - hold up, that is. The even better news is that Christmas Eve was filled with meaningful worship, beautiful moments, and the gathering of many people, who came to celebrate Christ's birth. It began a week ago, in fact, last Sunday evening with our Early Christmas Eve service. We met in the Fellowship Hall that night, in a casual setting around tables. We sang carols, heard the beautiful reading from Luke's Gospel, and shared candlelight. The flow of Christmas Eve continued on the day itself, with our two services for children and families in the afternoon. Hundreds gathered and little ones were everywhere. A professor from my seminary days used to call that kind of commotion in the church, “Holy Hubbub.” That's a pretty good description. Let's just say there was lots of energy in the place. Our kids led most of the service and they enjoyed the glow sticks during “Silent Night,” which is a safe, and not all that silent, alternative to burning candles. Our early evening service was led by our youth, and those present were mightily impressed with the faithful way our young people guided the worship, including the sermon given by three young ladies, a message that was deep, and honest, and thought provoking. The long Christmas Eve night ended with our traditional services at 8 and 10 o'clock. The music and liturgy, with the singing of “Silent Night” once more, brought a meaningful conclusion to a day of celebration.

This is what we experienced in this building on Christmas Eve, just days ago. A lot goes into the planning. The buildup grows as we count the days. And then, when it comes, it's over. Doesn't it feel like Christmas Eve comes and then goes so quickly? Can't the memory of that evening stay in our hearts a bit longer? Pastor Katya preached last Sunday morning and referred to the word “savor” when she talked about the good news of what God has done at Christmas. She said, “I just want to savor the good news.” I think that gets at what I'm feeling this morning. Holding the tender glow of a candle and softly singing a carol is a welcomed change from the way we usually experience life. We'd like to savor that. Maybe that's why I'm wishing we could stay a while longer with the experience of Christmas Eve. On that night luminaries lined our church property on the outside, and many families and good feelings filled our church building on the inside, and there was so much blessing in it all. Surely, this is what God wants for us, a heavenly and lasting peace.

Well, I confess that when I finally arrived home on Christmas Eve, just before midnight, I was more than ready for a long winter's nap. The thing is, Christmas Day came and like your family, ours gathered for a day of festivities. Most of us wore Christmas pajamas the whole day. We ate, opened gifts, ate some more, kicked back to enjoy being together, and then ended the day by eating again. Christmas celebrates God's love coming to us through Jesus, and for many that means being with those we love and focusing on the things that really matter. But just like Christmas Eve, Christmas Day comes and goes. Does it have to be that way? When the trash bags pile up and the recycling bin overflows with gift boxes, is that it? If we could only hold on to the peacefulness a bit longer. If we could only have a whole string of silent and holy nights.

As always, the gospel guides us. Our reading for today focuses our attention. On this Sunday after Christmas, we turn to The Gospel of Matthew. Matthew tells us why we must not linger in the warm glow of the Bethlehem manger for too long. Christmas is about God's love entering the world. That love comes through a baby, and the stunning reality is how this vulnerable child threatens the authority and power of the world. God's is all about love. The world is all about might, and wealth, and success, and strength. In the way the song sings that the baby Jesus had no place to lay his head, so the love of Christmas is often at odds with the priorities of the world. As Christians, we do more than just celebrate Christ's birth with a party and move on. As Christians, we accept what Matthew's Gospel tells us; that the gift of love is fragile and vulnerable. Love comes down at Christmas and the gospel makes it clear that love has no place in a world where Herod is king.

We display several different Nativity sets in our house during the season. You may do the same. Nativity sets remind us what the season is about. Here's a quick bible lesson. The way we picture the Nativity is actually a blending of two different gospels, both Luke's and Matthew's. Luke's gospel tells about the shepherds. Matthew doesn't mention them. Matthew's gospel tells us about the Magi, the Wise Men. Luke says nothing about this. Luke describes the manger, not Matthew, and Matthew ignores the angels, which are always singing in Luke. Our Nativity scenes pull all of this together in one beautiful picture. If there is a problem with this, it's that we don't take the Nativity display far enough. Matthew tells us that when Christ was born King Herod was close by. A more complete

Nativity scene should include a shadowy and sinister figure just out of the light. That's Herod, lurking about to find a way to destroy love's power. The Herod's of the world care about the protection of their own position and power. Matthew's gospel doesn't take away the beauty of our glowing candles and holy night but he wants us to know that the way of Jesus still threatens the power and authority of the world. Christ is love. Herod is about might. Christ offers mercy. Herod wants to win at all costs. Christ expresses the vulnerable and tender nature of God's goodness. Herod leads the charge for control, wealth, and self-centeredness. Love comes down at Christmas and without our commitment to protect and strengthen that love, the Herod's of the world will always try to win the day.

In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph plays a key role in protecting the gift of love. He does whatever is needed to keep the baby Jesus safe. What does this tell us? It teaches us that love is vulnerable. I know there are times in my life when I take love for granted. Don't you? Think about the people you love. Do we assume that this love will always be there? Do we assume we can say or do whatever we want because, after all, they love me. Not even the love that comes at Christmas is insulated from hurt or harm. Joseph protected the Christ child and our love deserves protection, too. Our kindness and mutual care toward one another fosters an environment where love stays safe. Joseph took on that mission and we can, too. How? Again, Joseph is our model. Joseph heard and responded to God's lead. He carried the baby Jesus to Egypt where the child would be safe. We listen for God's lead by being involved in community and by practicing a life of prayer. When you think about your world, say your family or the relationships in which you are involved, are they all just as you want them to be, as you need them to be? Maybe we want to keep holding that small candle and singing "Silent Night" because we'd rather pretend away the difficult areas of our lives. I'm not going to name names, of course, but there are some relationships in my life that are tough. Some days I'd just rather not go there, but God wants to lead me and you in a direction that preserves what is good and life-giving. God won't let us ignore the hard places but God will lead us through them and keep love alive.

There's a reason we can't just stay in the quiet holiness of Christmas Eve forever. Christmas is about love coming to us and that love is with us in all the circumstances and hard realities of our world. Christmas isn't about us staying away from it all. Christmas is about us entering into it all and protecting the gift of God's love. In the gospel story, Herod met his end. In the gospel story, the love that comes to us in Christ never dies. This is the best news of all. Amen.