

**Will We Glorify the God of the Nativity?
And Will We Reverberate with Christmas Joy?**
Christmas Eve & Christmas Morning, 2022

Beloved friends, fellow embodiars of the loving Christ light, welcome to this moment in time and space – this deeply cold Christmas Eve and morning of 2022, gathered in the kind warmth of community.

Let us pray. O God, you reach out to us this evening and morning through beautiful messengers – messengers *“filled with your grace and filled with your truth”* (John 1:14). As we meditate on words of challenge from the prophet Isaiah, voices of experience from our sacred and familiar nativity story, and faithful articulations from the gospel writer; grant to our hearts and our minds utter openness, that we might receive their messages and allow them to inform our lives once again this Christmas. Amen.

Earlier this week, I framed separate questions for Christmas Eve (Will we glorify and God of the nativity?) and Christmas morning (Will we reverberate with Christmas joy?). As it turns out, I believe that our responses to both questions hinge on our willingness to hold a faithful posture of radical openness to the possibility of the Christ light (an embodied experience of the love of God) breaking into each of our lives in new ways.

So, this evening and morning, I invite us to wonder both: Will we glorify the God of the nativity? (That is to ask, will we worship God through the ways we live?) – and - Will we reverberate with Christmas joy?

Among our many beautiful scripture readings for this Christmas Eve and Christmas morning are words Sharri read this morning from Isaiah chapter 52.

The dense book of Isaiah was likely written by multiple people across many years. And much of Isaiah was written to a people in distress. One army attacked Jerusalem without conquering it, leaving the people of Israel to struggle toward recovery. Another army attacked Jerusalem and burned the city, forcing the people into exile in a far-away land. At yet another juncture, Isaiah's community was allowed to return to Jerusalem after already having reestablished their lives in a new place. Trying to return home can be difficult (as many of us know) – even in much easier circumstances.

Hear again these words from Isaiah 52:

“How welcome upon the mountains are the feet of one who brings good news—who announces peace, and brings news of happy things, and proclaims deliverance, saying to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’ Listen! Those who keep watch raise a cry, together they shout for joy—for they see with their own eyes God’s restoration of Zion! Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For God comforts the people, and redeems Jerusalem. God bares a holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the Earth will behold the salvation of our God!”

This writer within Isaiah was a yes/and kind of leader. The people of Israel must have needed yes/and leadership in their historical context. We, too, could stand to become more fluent in the language and practice of yes/and – in both our private and public lives. Let me explain what I mean. We often live in the language and practice of yes/but. Yes, your idea sounds valuable, but... Yes, I would like to make a career change, but... Yes, I am being hurt in this relationship, but...

We often assign limits to our own possibilities by living in the realm of yes/but. The danger of yes/but is that it dismisses possibility and normalizes our stuckness. This Christmas, I invite us to wonder: **What next move could unfold in your life if you were to believe and begin to embody yes/and?**

The characters in our nativity story (narrated beautifully last evening by Claire and Jenni, Rolf and Heather) definitely needed to be yes/and actors in their own lives. By all accounts, Jesus also lived a yes/and way of life. Yes/and acknowledges with its “yes” very real lived circumstances (which might be challenging, hurtful, or cause for ambivalence) and offers with its “and” the next possibility.

Remembering the turmoil the people of Israel were experiencing during the times of Isaiah, hear again this single verse: *“Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For God comforts the people, and redeems Jerusalem.”* (Isaiah 52:9). Yes/and. The prophet acknowledges that, yes, the people are in ruins. And Isaiah calls the people to be open to the redemptive, comforting love of God in their lives – a love that never lets go – a love that the gospel writer of John calls *“—a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.”* (John 1:5).

In the first portion of the nativity story from the gospel of Luke, Mary and Joseph are beautiful messengers – *filled with grace, filled with truth*. Their oppressors (the Roman government) considered them insignificant persons at best, but more likely did not even see or consider them at all. Mary and Joseph were to their oppressors simply pawns in a scheme to become richer and more powerful. Imagine their yes/and journey together. Yes, they were so poor. Yes, Mary was so pregnant.

Yes, their courtship was fairly new and the circumstances of Mary's pregnancy were suspect. Yes, they were making a long and difficult journey by foot with a donkey's assistance. And they were in it together. And Joseph supported Mary as she gave birth. Yes, those who controlled many of the circumstances of their lives did not see them. And they saw each other.

This Christmas, I invite us to wonder: **How might it change you to take in the message of Mary and Joseph and decide to show the people in your life that you see them?** By whom do you long to be seen? Will you tell them that, yes, you have your differences; and you still want to try to see each other and honor the light of God's love present in each other?

In another portion of the nativity story in which angels appear to the shepherds, we hear: *"The angel said to them, 'You have nothing to fear! I have come to proclaim good news to you—news of a great joy to be shared by the whole people'"* (Luke 2:10). The angel is nearly bursting with joy and urgency. Yet the angel pauses in compassion to say (in so many words), 'Yes, I can tell you're scared.' Then the angel goes on with the and – and I want to share this amazing good news with you.

Maybe you have been in the place of the angel. You are excited about an idea you have for your family or your workplace, about a decision to which you've arrived. You are eager to share it with someone whom you trust to be in it with you or alongside you. You read the skepticism or distractedness on that person's face or in their body.

This Christmas, I invite us to wonder: Instead of defaulting to yes/but, disregarding yourself by succumbing to skepticism and distractedness, **how might it change you to practice the angel's way of acknowledging straightforwardly what you read in the other person's face or tone and boldly sharing what you long to share with them anyway?**

And then there were the shepherds, the poorest of the poor in their time and place. The nativity story according to Luke concludes with the shepherds responding by seeking out the Christ Child and then sharing the news with everyone whom they encounter. The writer shares, "*The shepherds went away glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told.*" (Luke 2:20).

How easy and understandable would it have been to be a Yes/but shepherd? Yes, this has been a phenomenal night, but life is still hard and tomorrow will be back to our isolated work. Not those shepherds! They buoyed each other's spirits by telling and retelling their story. Yes/and. Yes, it had been a phenomenal night, and everyone needed to hear about the hope that this newborn child and his parents inspired.

This Christmas, I invite us to wonder: **How might it change you to practice the shepherds' way of unselfconscious, hope-filled joy?** What brings you the most hope and joy? Do you hide or dampen your hope and joy sometimes for appearance' sake? Hiding and dismissing ourselves can lead us down a slippery yes/but slope.

What were those yes/and shepherds so excited about? Last evening, we heard from the gospel of John about the source of their joy: "*In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light—a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken...*

And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us... filled with grace, filled with truth.” (John 1:4-5, 14).

Yes, there was darkness in Mary and Joseph’s lives. Yes, there was darkness in the shepherds’ lives. And, yes, there would definitely be darkness in Jesus’ life.

Yes, fellow beloved ones, there is darkness in each of our lives. And there is light. **Jesus, the Word of God’s love is a light that shines persistently** – even in our deepest darkness.

Will we each consider our own opportunities to become more yes/and people this Christmas? In whose life could you be a beautiful messenger of the yes/and light of God’s love?

Opportunities await us – both to glorify or worship the God of the Nativity through our living and to reverberate with Christmas joy as we move into a new year. May we do the Christmas work of being Love’s beautiful messengers, because Love is counting on each of us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
December 24 & 25, 2022 (Christmas Eve & Morning)
Isaiah 52:7-10; Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-5, 14