Inspired to Grow in Tenderness

Friends and neighbors – all of us relatives within one beautiful human and broader Earth community, on this Christmas Eve of 2025, I invite you to complete the following thought with me: *The story of the first Christmas is* _____*.* How would you complete the sentence?

I invite you to close your eyes and to rest in this moment. What single word would you add to describe how the story lands with you. The story of the first Christmas is _____. *(pause)*

Let's open our eyes now and hear from one another, sharing our words aloud. The story of the first Christmas is _____. *Bright, holy, beautiful, joyous, reassuring, a mess, peace, love, mysterious, a miracle, renewal, a struggle, kindness, majestic, true, radiant, hope, a promise, sacred.*

Thank you for sharing how the story lands with you. My word is "tender." The story of the first Christmas is tender, by which I mean open to vulnerability, love, and compassion. Tenderness can be quite risky. Vulnerability risks pain. Love risks loss. Compassion risks rejection. Precisely in its riskiness lies the liminal value of the tenderness at the heart of the Christmas story.

Amidst all of the challenges each of us is experiencing this winter (internally, within our relationships, and in our shared public life), we offer each other a great gift on this holy night – the gift of a sacred shimmering pause. So let us hold ourselves radically open – open to the story of the Christ light arriving through the birth of Jesus and open to receiving new inspiration – inspiration for becoming more tender people and inspiration for embracing the growth tenderness requires.

I hope that we will each carry with us from this time of reflection renewed faith that God will work in and through our tenderness.

I wonder, what aspect of tenderness is calling your name – beckoning you into new personal growth territory this winter? Are you called toward vulnerability, love, compassion?

Considering Jesus' birth story, let's give ourselves over for a moment to pondering the spiritual practice of **vulnerability**. How does the story speak to us about vulnerability (which risks being hurt or wounded)?

Every year, I am moved by the arc of the **Mary and Joseph** story. We read that the pregnancy was unexpected. We hear that they were very young. We read of the cruel actions of the occupying Roman army. We understand that the couple was forced to travel a long way for taxation just as the birth was approaching. Nothing was going according to customary expectations as far as their marriage was concerned. Before or during her labor pain, Mary must have longed for the women of her family who would have typically accompanied and supported her through the birthing process. Who WAS there with her? Joseph.

Mary and Joseph could have chosen guardedness (as any of us might) – the opposite of vulnerability (a posture that would have said, 'I can do this all by myself. I don't need you'). I am reminded of a quote from the movie *World's Greatest Dad* (uttered by the late Robin Williams): *"I used to think the worst thing in life was to end up all alone. It's not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people that make you feel all alone."*

I wonder, this Christmas, will you join with Mary and Joseph in choosing **interdependence** (the fruit of tenderhearted vulnerability)? **Who in your life needs to hear you say, 'I can NOT do this all by myself. I need you.'**

Considering Jesus' birth story, let's give ourselves over for a moment to pondering the spiritual practice of **love**. How does the story speak to us about love? Love often looks or feels like sticking our neck out emotionally. Love risks loss.

When I think of the **shepherds** of that first Christmas, I am impressed by their openness to joy and kindness shared in community. They shared an awe-filled experience of angelic beauty. And then they felt compelled to share the experience with others.

They took a risk by visiting the young couple and their newborn child, hoping that they could share joy with one another. We know that love is about give and take. If a loving move is not reciprocated, we may experience the loss of a potential connection. I wonder what welcoming response the shepherds experienced among Mary, Joseph, and the baby – that encouraged them to keep sharing their experience of joy anywhere and anywhere, trusting that it might be welcomed and shared.

I wonder, will you join with the shepherds in choosing **mutuality** (the fruit of tenderhearted love) this Christmas? **Who needs you to show them your love by giving and receiving in more balanced measure?**

And finally, considering Jesus' birth story, let's give ourselves over for a moment to pondering the spiritual practice of **compassion**. How does the story speak to us about compassion – that is, the capacity to suffer with another.

When I consider the magi who will come to visit young Jesus and his parents, I am struck by their position as privileged outsider – highly educated people of means and influence.

They would bring material gifts as a way of honoring a family of a much lesser status than they. I imagine Mary and Joseph each processing their encounter with the magi and sensing that these well-off visitors' motives were a true longing to honor them and their child.

I wonder, will you join with the magi in choosing **allyship** (the fruit of tenderhearted compassion) this Christmas? Who among your marginalized neighbors needs you to not just bemoan but show up with your care about the daily challenges brought about by their social location?

I've heard it said on more than one occasion, "they won't care how much you know until they know how much you care." **Are you willing to risk rejection when offering to suffer with another? Or might you be one in need of an ally? Will you risk rejection by reach out to ask for the accompaniment of an ally in your struggle?**

My deep wish, my longing for each of us this Christmas is that we would grow into fuller tenderness.

Through the practice of **vulnerability**, may we bear fruit of **interdependence**.

Through the practice of **love**, may we bear fruit of **mutuality**.

Through the practice of compassion, may we bear fruit of **allyship**.

Because the love of Christ is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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Text: the Christmas story