

Christmas Eve “Worship In Place”

Winter, 2020

Helpful Resources:

- 🕯️ A candle and lighter
- 📱 An internet-connected device.



Ponder:

Throughout the season of Advent the discipline has been “waiting”. We have been mindful of the presence of an absence. Watching. Waiting. With the prophets of old; with pregnant Mary, waiting together for that which seems to never come.

Suddenly, however, the experience changes. “Presence” becomes the gospel story. “*The Word became flesh,*” observes the gospel writer John with awe, “and lived among us.” But John doesn’t stop there. He goes on to say, “*and we have seen his glory*” (John 1:14).

Think about that: in our own experience, the glory of God has been pulsing - beating like a heart. Incarnation – God becoming flesh and living among us – isn’t confined to a single occurrence 2000 years ago. If God is God, God has not ceased to make the Creative Word manifest and concretely real in the midst of every time and place.

It isn’t abstraction. It is the earthy truth. God’s glory is all around us.



Read again the birth story as Luke tells it:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone

around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



Reflect on the story's details. Luke is very specific:

- 🌀 When did it happen?
- 🌀 Where did it happen?
- 🌀 To whom did it happen?
- 🌀 Imagine what the scene looked like.
- 🌀 Imagine what it smelled like.
- 🌀 Imagine the feelings that must have undergirded the characters. Hope? Fear? Worry? Joy? Fierce protectiveness?



The Huron Carol, likely written in the mid-17th century by a French Jesuit missionary named Jean de Brebeuf living among the Huron people of Canada. In it, Brebeuf translates the nativity story into the native language and familiar elements of the Hurons. Many hymnals include the carol, and many versions have been recorded. One is linked here, and the English lyrics are below:

<https://youtu.be/WTIU2jO9VZI>

THE HURON CAROL

Saint Jean de Brébeuf (25 March 1593 – 16 March 1649),
English Translation by Jesse Edgar Middleton, 1926

1. *'Twas in the moon of winter-time
When all the birds had fled,
That mighty Gitchi Manitou
Sent angel choirs instead;
Before their light the stars grew dim,
And wandering hunter heard the hymn:*

Refrain:

*"Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born,
In excelsis gloria."*

2. *Within a lodge of broken bark
The tender Babe was found,
A ragged robe of rabbit skin
Enwrapp'd His beauty round;
But as the hunter braves drew nigh,
The angel song rang loud and high. Refrain*

3. *O children of the forest free,
O sons of Manitou,
The Holy Child of earth and heaven
Is born today for you.
Come kneel before the radiant Boy
Who brings you beauty, peace and joy. Refrain*



If you were telling your own indigenous version of the nativity story in the present time, drawn from your own cultural and geographic environment, what images would you choose?

- ② How would you connect the birth to this historical moment? Would it be the pandemic, presidential leadership, civil unrest, economic concern, or something else?
- ② In what kind of a space would Jesus be born?
- ② To whom would Jesus be born?
- ② In what materials close at hand would the mother wrap the newborn?
- ② In what kind of a makeshift bed would the baby sleep?
- ② Who would be the workers to whom the angels announced the birth?

- ⊗ What would those workers be wearing?
- ⊗ What would the workers do or say by way of greeting the baby Jesus and his parents?
- ⊗ In Luke's telling, and in the Huron Carol, nature is more than a backdrop. Creation is an active participant - - a natural birth, the star, animals, straw. How would nature participate in your version of the nativity story?



Step outside if you are able and stand beneath the night sky. If you can't go outside, turn off the house lights and stand at a window.

- ⊗ Be still and pay careful, silent attention.
- ⊗ What moves? Are there animals scurrying about? Are trees bending? Are clouds, illumined by the moon, passing overhead?
- ⊗ Are there stars visible above? Can you make out specific constellations?
- ⊗ What do you feel? Pay attention to the cold. If snow is falling, receive the flakes onto your upturned face. Open your mouth and taste the crystals. Is the air still, or blowing?
- ⊗ Explore with your fingers some element in nature if possible, such as the craggy bark of a tree.
- ⊗ Experience the concreteness of the moment; the "realness" of it; the presentness of it.
- ⊗ Consider again the affirmation of John that the Word of God – the creative wisdom and imagination of all that is holy - has become flesh and now lives among us.



Ponder:

- ⊗ Somehow, Christians began privileging the metaphorical conception of the "Reign of God" – the presence of God in all God's fullness - as an other-worldly place: "Heaven". Though we have routinely thought of Heaven as "up there," as the top level of a 3-story universe, we haven't really any clue as to exactly where Heaven might be situated. We have only been clear that it's not "here".
- ⊗ But that's not what scripture says.
 - In John's climactic Revelation, he sees the Divine taking up permanent residence on the earth.
 - "Behold, the home of God is among mortals" (Revelation 21:3).



Back inside, light your candle.

- ⊗ Feel the warmth of its flame.
- ⊗ Watch the movement of the flickering fire.
- ⊗ Note the intensity of its light.
- ⊗ Holding in mind all the earthy, real-time elements you just noted outside or through your window, hear again the confident assurance of the Gospel of John:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.



Sing

*Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and child,
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.*

*Silent Night, holy night,
Wondrous star, lend thy light;
With the angels let us sing
Alleluia to our King;
Christ, the Savior is born,
Christ, the Savior is born.*



Pray:

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray,
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our God, Emmanuel.*