

**Sermon**  
**Luke 2**  
**Christmas Eve, 2020**  
**Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon**

This Advent season certainly has been different this year. There has been so much sadness, so much loss, especially given that now the number of pandemic cases continues to spike in unprecedented numbers. Most of us have put off any form of joyful celebration this year because it seems no one is especially joyous. I found out yesterday that Pat, a woman from my home congregation, whom I've known my entire life, whose kids I grew up with, has had COVID. She is recovering, but that's a miracle in itself. She's 95! I imagine that by now, each of us can name someone we know who has had the disease.

So these candles we will light tonight sure have a lot of darkness to overcome this year. In addition to these, I see candles glowing from church windows, in homes, on Facebook pages and via Zoom. Each of them doing their best to overcome the darkness.

We all grieve all those we have lost this year, we grieve the loss of our freedom to travel to see loved ones, and we grieve the hardships from all the restrictions that have been placed upon us. We grieve in different ways. But we must be patient with one another in our sorrow because there is a rumor floating around among the people of God that is so dangerous and untrue, it simply must be exposed. It's a rumor that began long before this Advent season.

Author Rachel Held Evans, who died last year, writes that it's the rumor that God can be chased out of this place, this country, this world.

She wonders if you have heard it from some commentators who, every Christmas, work themselves into a frenzy over their perceived "War on Christmas." They storm checkout counters to demand that clerks issue them a "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays." They demand that every gift purchased, every mall opened late, every credit card maxed out must be done so in Jesus' name...or else Christ will be pushed out of Christmas.

These critics cry 'foul' because it seems to me that they believe that in order to show up, God needs our help here on earth - that God won't show up unless we help God along.

Or you might have heard the rumor from some religious folk who insist that if we don't keep God's name in our pledge, on our money, and on our courthouse walls, then we won't be able to keep God in our country for ourselves.

Or you might have heard the rumor from a friend on Facebook, saying that God abandoned the United States (specifically), because our government has recognized the freedom of religion - and that means people who aren't Christian are free to worship the way that makes sense to them. Freedom of religion includes Jewish people, Muslims, Buddhists, and people who don't ascribe to any religion. When asked where God is during this pandemic, they respond that we are no longer a Christian nation. These Christians have said that God doesn't prevent school shootings because "God is not allowed in public schools," because "we have systematically removed God" from that place.

They somehow forget that *God showed up as a baby.*  
As a minority, oppressed by *the Roman Empire.*  
As a Jew.  
In a barn.  
After a genocide.  
To the applause of only a few poor shepherds.

If the miracle of God coming to earth tells us anything,  
it's that *God can't be kept out. God can't be kept out of this world, this place, this now.*  
Some have forgotten that when God showed up as a baby,  
God was executed by the government.  
On a cross.  
Stripped of all power.  
Only to rise from a borrowed grave three days later because...  
*God can't be kept out.*

*God can be wherever God wants to be.*  
*God needs no formal invitation.*  
*We couldn't "systematically remove" God even if we tried.*  
*Sometimes I even wonder, why does God bother? And I am continually reminded that*  
*God shows up because God loves us. Each and every one of us.*

As Rachel Held Evans writes, "If God's coming to earth teaches us anything, it's that God can be found everywhere: in a cattle trough, on a throne, among the poor, with the sick [and their caregivers in ICUs], on a donkey, in a fishing boat, with the junkie, with the prostitute, with the hypocrite, [with the forgotten in nursing homes], in places of power, in places of oppression, in poverty, in wealth, where God's name is known, where it is unknown, with our friends, with our enemies, in our convictions, in our doubts, in life, in death, at the table, on the cross, and in every kindergarten classroom..."

Jesus is born in a place where people needed him most.  
And God does even more than that.  
God sends angels to people who have given up on God.  
How would you respond to God sending angels to you when you'd given up on God?  
Like the shepherds, I'd be terrified.  
But in Jesus, God comes in a way that is far from frightening. Jesus comes vulnerably, helplessly, as "a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Jesus is born like any other baby, except Jesus is born on the road and laid in a feeding trough.  
No magi at this manger scene. Jesus is born among the lowly and the poor.

And Luke gives no hint that Jesus is anything special: there is no angel over the stable because the angels are over in the field with the shepherds. In fact, Mary and Joseph only hear of angelic activity because the shepherds tell them. Could it be that we then, will receive the good news of great joy not from angels, or realize it on our own, but maybe we get that great news from someone sent to us from out in the field, or off a boat, or in the hospital?

Jesus is born to us who long for him, but the babe born at Bethlehem is also born to outsiders - those who have been outside so long that they have given up on God.

Hearing this on Christmas Eve is good news to me because I know and love people so depressed and lonely this Christmas that they cannot even think about worshipping God. And I suspect you do as well. I suspect that the startling news is that, while we sit in our cozy homes, or freezing here in our cars, God is sending angels out into the fields and into neighborhoods and into homes with good news of great joy. And I imagine that Jesus is being born among people who have given up on him. That's the inspiration for me to be able to sing of the joy that comes into the world this night!

On a Christmas Eve day, not so long ago, I visited Phyllis in the hospital. During my visit, we shared communion. After we finished and sat for a moment in silent prayer, Phyllis straightened back up and announced, "God is in this place. Isn't it amazing that God comes to us, To US, in this room?" I still think that was such a profound statement. Although Phyllis has long since gone to meet her Lord, that day she recognized that she was so loved by God that God would even bother to come to us even in her hospital room! It might be so easy to take God for granted, but Phyllis never did.

Where is God tonight? Sick and laying on a stretcher in a tent because there was no more room for God in the ER or ICU. Suffering with the doctors, nurses and other first responders. With children and their teachers. Grieving with parents and family members of those who have died but who never got the chance to say goodbye. God is with all who no longer can provide for themselves and their families and God is with those who share some of what they have with them. God is with service personnel around the world, with those struggling for freedom, with the hungry and homeless, and with those who have given up on God. God is here for us tonight.

The Christmas miracle is that God comes to us tonight both as a baby and in the body and blood of our savior.

*Because God cannot be kept out. God will not be vanquished from our lives.*

And although sometimes it might be hard, celebrating Christmas can be a chance to begin healing. I will keep appreciating these Advent candles and will admire the candles you will hold high in a few minutes when we sing Silent Night. Because even the smallest light can chase away the shadows lurking in this world, that even in the darkest places, *God can't be kept out.* May these flames be a reminder to all of us that we don't have to wonder where God is, but instead that we know that God is here...amidst the suffering,

That God is here,  
in those swaddling clothes,  
on that cross,  
in that grave, on the throne.

And that God is right here in the bread and wine,  
For no amount of darkness can overcome the light...which is God, Godself.

Amen