

### **The First Reading is from Isaiah 62:1-5**

- <sup>1</sup>For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,  
and her salvation like a burning torch.
- <sup>2</sup>The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory;  
and you shall be called by a new name  
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
- <sup>3</sup>You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
- <sup>4</sup>You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;  
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
and your land Married;  
for the LORD delights in you,  
and your land shall be married.
- <sup>5</sup>For as a young man marries a young woman,  
so shall your builder marry you,  
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you.

The prophetic imagination is at work in the words we just heard from Isaiah. The key symbols of Zion theology - the presence of the Jerusalem Temple and the safety of its city walls, and the continuance of the Davidic reign, still lie in ruin. The Babylonian exile has taken its toll, with the loss of self-rule and the apparent absence of God given the destruction of the temple. Into the midst of this reality, of shattered hopes, Isaiah imagines another future for God's people in this royal city.

What a wonderful message for us this morning, for the reality of the world around us has often shattered our hopes. The reality of the world around us often seems desolate and maybe even forsaken as floods devastate, fires consume, bullets and bombs destroy, and death tolls. So, listen again to some phrases from this passage, as you engage your imagination this Christmas Eve morn. "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her...for the LORD delights in you... so shall your God rejoice over you!"

What seems desolate or forsaken in your life, in our country, in our world today? This Christmas Eve Sunday, can we hear Isaiah's prophetic words as words of hope for us? These simply ordinary words have the power to transform, as we imagine their truth for our lives and for our world. Yet, will we engage our imaginations and envision what could be, instead of what is?

We gather today to worship because of a child born in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph. We gather to celebrate the wonder of Emmanuel, for God is with us and this reality changes everything!

**Our second reading comes from the Gospel of Luke 2:5-7.** This gospel contains much of the Christmas Story we retell every year – the trek to Bethlehem, the angels, the shepherds, and Mary's ponderings. So, listen for God's Word to us today

through an ordinary couple who have journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered in a census.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> 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.

Christmas Sunday has arrived whether we are ready or not! Families and friends will be gathering around tables of celebration this evening and all day tomorrow. Feasts will be enjoyed, as we remember and give thanks that Christ is born!

Yet, today, the simple 24-hour period from midnight to midnight is really like any other day. The dark night sky became light today, as it ordinarily does when the sun climbs over the mountains that grace Redlands. The birds awoke and began to sing their songs as they ordinarily do. We all awoke from sleep this morning as we ordinarily do. Today is really just another ordinary day with 24 hours to spend like any other day, yet this day like any other day is also holy.

As you heard earlier during the lighting of the Advent Candle, I have named our fourth candle of Advent *Ordinary Holiness*. Yet, some among us might deem these two words joined together an oxymoron, like jumbo shrimp and clearly confused.

Yet, my experience tells me otherwise, for the ordinary is often ripe with holiness. At Sunrise this past Thursday, the first verse of *Away in the Manger* was used as our text. Ordinary words from this well-worn, and oft described sappy, Christmas Carol became holy, as we shared the stirrings of our hearts with each other. This past Wednesday, an ordinary sunset brought a Salvation Army ringer and me into conversation, as we shared with each other about its beauty, as the last rays of sunlight dazzled the sky.

As Macrina Wiederkehr, a Benedictine monastic, once wrote, "Holiness comes wrapped in the ordinary. There are burning bushes all around you. Every tree is full of angels. Hidden beauty is waiting in every crumb." Holiness permeates the ordinary. Yet, I wonder, do you see or experience burning bushes, trees full of angels or hidden beauty in every crumb," as you walk through daily life?

American writer and management consultant Margaret Wheatley comments, "I find it sad that so many of us have forgotten, or never learned, that sacred [holiness] is an everyday experience." "I find it sad," Wheatley said. Have we forgotten that holiness is an everyday experience? Or did we never learn this truth?

In our 24/7 wired world with constant distractions, we often miss everyday experiences of the holy. We become too busy to notice the burning bushes all around us. Or maybe we are so preoccupied with what is next that we miss the tree full of angels right in front of us. Racing through life from one event to another we miss the hidden beauty in every crumb.

In a management training course, I facilitated years ago, we concluded the training with a module entitled *Be Here Now*. Be at work when you are at work. Be at home when you are home. Be at church when you are at church...yes, you shouldn't be thinking about your last-minute grocery store list or planning exactly how you are going to get everything done in time for your family gathering, as you sit here in worship! Be here NOW in worship.

Yet, we struggle with this simply ordinary idea, to be present to the present moment. This past Thursday evening, I enjoyed the Lindsey Sterling Christmas Concert in Los Angeles. I savored each and every song, as I watched this incredibly talented young woman play her violin and dance all at the same time. Yet, throughout her concert smart phones came into view between the stage and me, as people tried to capture the moment. People were looking at screens, rather than really being present to the moment. Have you ever hurried to video tape or snap a photo of something, only to miss the actual moment? Only to miss the ordinary holiness right before your own eyes?

Listen as Margaret Wheatley tells of a crumb of holiness she experienced. She wrote, "One day I noticed a mother bird flying back and forth, worms dangling from her beak. She was working diligently to provide for her babies. Watching her, I remembered my own mothering, and suddenly, I felt connected to all other beings who, as mothers, try to keep life going. A brief moment of noticing one hard-working bird, and I suddenly felt different, more connected. The bird, me, mothers everywhere, we're all doing our part to bring more life into the world. She does her work, I do mine, and in this moment of recognition, my heart opens to the truth that we all share in this together, instead of feeling tired by such responsibilities as mothering. I feel blessed to be a part of all mothers trying to keep life going."

Something ordinary, a mother bird tending to her young became ordinary holiness for Wheatley. It opened her to something more than self, to all who keep life going. Yet, the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel no longer seems ordinary to us, because it has been layered with over 2,000 years of telling. Yet, giving birth, just like mothering, is pretty ordinary.

Do you know how many babies will probably be born today? This December 24<sup>th</sup>, statisticians estimate about 350,000 babies will be born worldwide. As midwives or nurses and doctors attend to mothers, with anxious fathers-to-be waiting for his newborn to arrive, is pretty ordinary, too. This particular historical birth we await, like all births, was simply ordinary. The particular birth we await, like all births, was also holy.

Now the setting for this birth is probably not so ordinary in countries like America. But less than ideal situations, like this Bethlehem stable ripe with animal odors, is simply ordinary for a large portion of the world's population. The earthy smells that perfumed the air were common for Joseph and Mary. A newborn wrapped tightly with bands of cloth was pretty ordinary, too. Yet, this ordinary story connects us to the prophecies of Isaiah – "for a child has been born for us... he will establish and uphold his kingdom and justice from this time onward and forevermore." When we are able to see the holy in the ordinary, we are connected to a larger story. Ordinary holiness engages our imagination and creates a more spacious, expansive, and liberating world. We can glimpse what can be, even in the midst of the reality of what is.

Yet, will we take the words of Isaiah's prophetic imagination to heart? Will we believe that we are God's delight? Will we accept that God rejoices over us? Will we remember God's command, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy"? This is not a charge for us to earn our holiness. This is a charge to recognize that holiness is our inheritance. Holiness permeates each of us and all of creation simply because God is holy.

And holiness permeates the simply ordinary words of our Christmas Carol today. Words inspired by our passage from Luke. Words we would have learned to sing in Sunday school, if Christian faith was part of our childhood:

Listen to the words of the first verse: “Away in a manger no crib for his bed, the little Lord Jesus **laid down** his sweet head. The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.” What image or word speaks to you from this verse? How might this ordinary word or phrase connect you to something more, something larger than yourself?

The words that spoke to me on Thursday morning were “lay down”, not “laid down”, as the version we used had the present, not past tense. I imagined all the weight we bear for what is not right in this world. I imagined the weight of my own worries and concerns. We bear what is not right and we all carry our burdens, yet these words were an invitation from God on Thursday morning. “Lay down, release and let go all that is not right with the world, Cheryl. Lay down all your burdens and trust me,” said God. The ordinary holiness of these words connected me to the promise of Jesus, “Come all who are weary and carrying heaving burdens, and I will give you rest.” This Christmas will we lay down our worries, concerns and burdens, trusting that the babe born in Bethlehem can and will give us rest?

“The cattle are lowing; the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. I love thee, Lord Jesus; look down from the sky and stay by my side until morning is nigh.” This verse is the Hallmark manger scene, with a cherubic baby lying quietly in a manger with a bright star overhead. Scripture doesn’t tell us whether baby Jesus cried or not. Yet, this ordinary stable scene holds the mystery of the faith we claim, for Christ did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Christ emptied himself, becoming fully human.

And then my favorite verse of this carol: **Be near me**, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to **stay close** by me forever and love me, I pray. **Bless all the dear children** in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there. “**Be near me, stay close by me, love me, I pray.**” These phrases sound very self-centered with all the “me” language, yet I hear the word me in terms of my relationship with the Christ. Do I want to be near Christ? Do I want Christ to stay close by me? Do I feel loved by Christ?

I know why these ordinary words are holy for me, for I cherish my relationship with the mystery I call God, whom I have come to know most fully through Christ Jesus. This little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay, reminds me of God’s willingness to enter into the messiness of this world. This little Lord Jesus demonstrates another way of being most fully human, for Christ never clamored for power or fame. He often thinned the crowd following him, rather than pander to the crowd’s desires. This little Lord Jesus sacrificially gave himself for others, especially those whom society cast out or considered unworthy.

I want Jesus to be near me, to constantly illumine the path before me. Yet, it is not all about Jesus and me, for the verse continues, “**Bless all the dear children.**” Yes, Christ came for all, not just for some. Christ came to fit us for our eternal home, to show us the way to live and move and have our being NOW.

**The little Lord Jesus came**, so that we might be fully human NOW, fully present to the present moment, fully engaged in the messiness of this world, fully engaged in

the simply ordinary aspects of our everyday lives, ever aware of the beauty of every crumb.

My prayer for all of us this Christmas Eve Sunday morn is that we will be here now as we walk through life, for God is with us. God goes before us and behind us, God goes above us and below us, God goes beside us and within us. Practice being here now, be here not there, be fully present to the moment, not absent, for only then will you see burning bushes, trees full of angels and the beauty of every crumb. My friends, ordinary holiness abounds. Amen.