

“A Different Kind of King” – Luke 02:08 - Christmas Eve, 2011

What a joy it is to gather together as a family of faith here on Christmas Eve! We have survived the exhausting preparations, we have overcome the busyness and chaos that leads up to this moment. We've mailed parcels and cards; we've hung the stockings; we have decorated our homes, our offices, our church. Both inside and outside the lights are twinkling, the pantry is groaning with food ready to be eaten, and the presents are piled under the tree. While we have not been blessed with a white Christmas here in downtown Vancouver, all the same it is a beautiful night, especially beautiful because this is the night we celebrate our dear Saviour's birth. This is the night we reflect back to that most special of nights, when a long time ago, in a distant land occupied by a foreign army, God touched the earth and touched the lives of people forever.

We love the story and we can probably recite most of it from heart, for it is a story of love, a tale of heavenly love that covers all of creation and Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is an especially tender and intimate story, isn't it? In only a few words we have the complete picture of a young couple becoming parents while far from their home. In that moment, fear and uncertainty changed to joy and rejoicing, as a child is born, and is lovingly touched, wrapped in warm dry cloths and laid in a soft bed of sweet-smelling hay. (When we in the city hear about a stable, we tend to think of an uncomfortable place, full of animals and not-so-pleasant animal smells, but if you have ever been blessed with the experience of coming into a warm barn on a cold and snowy night then I know that when you hear this story you can still recall the sweet, sweet smell of hay.) A young woman gives birth, and their lives are touched forever.

That birth was on the one hand completely normal. Into a world that wrestled with storms and earthquakes and tsunamis and economic meltdowns, into a region seemingly endlessly searching for peace and finding instead wars and conflicts and repressive rulers and occupying superpowers, into a faith that longed for a messianic king who would with power and might was born an infant child, the son of an unremarkable couple in a nowhere village in the backwoods of a subdued nation.

But while his was a perfectly normal, quite unremarkable birth, it was at the same time a birth unlike any other. A birth so different from any other that even heaven couldn't keep quiet about it. An angel of the Lord found some poor shepherds hanging out on a hillside, and just had to blurt out the good news about this special birth. An ordinary birth in so many ways - and yet a birth so very unique that even the glory of the Lord lit up that hillside as the angel told these poor shepherds just how special this baby was, a Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord. And with that pronouncement of a unique and incredible action of grace by God all heaven let loose with celebration - a multitude of the heavenly host praising God.

What was it about this birth that made it so unique that it would be accompanied by such heavenly acclaim? This was the moment foretold in scriptures, the moment when God was suddenly among people - among us - in a whole new and utterly meaningful way. This was a whole different kind of king than the ones the people expected from the proclamations of the prophets. Instead of a mighty warrior king destined to lead the people in righteous battle what the world received was an infant child, a baby who would with the power of God overcome the forces of evil on behalf of those who would follow him and overcome even death itself.

In this ordinary yet extraordinary birth God came to dwell in the flesh with the people of the world. This was the moment of "Immanuel - God with us" experiencing life as we do in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed One. People could no longer complain that God was somehow remote, stand-offish, unable or unwilling to truly feel their pain. Now, in the person who would come to be recognized as one with the Father and in whom the Father could be found, God was - and continues to be - fully among us.

And so on this night of nights, recognizing God among us, we join the long line of people from across the ages as we in turn come to witness and worship; we come to pay our respects at the feet of the Holy Child who came that we might have life, abundant and eternal. The Holy Child, the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Son of the Most High, Jesus, our Lord and our King. As we come before Him, once again hear the story, let it wash over you, fold the story into your heart and your DNA, remember with great fondness that young couple who offered themselves in God's service, and above all embrace each other with the love that the Holy Child proclaimed with his birth, his life, his death and his rising again victorious. Celebrate the birth of Christ in your hearts as well, preparing Him room, and experiencing in Him the presence of God near you, the touch of God healing you, the gracious power of God restoring you and uplifting you, until at last we all shall be gathered with all the saints into His loving arms for all time.