

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

The Birth of Empathy

Isaiah 53:2 ff

*“He grew up like a young and tender sprout,
like a root from dry ground.*

*His appear wasn't comely or beautiful
when people saw him.*

*He was despised and rejected,
a man of sorrow and all too familiar with grief...*

*Surely he has borne our grief
and carried our sorrow...”*

Luke 1:39 ff

“In those days Mary hastily set out to a small Judean town in the hills. There she entered the house of Elizabeth. When Mary greeted her, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped. Suddenly Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed loudly, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’”

1 Cor. 12:25 ff

“May there be no division within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one suffers all suffer together; if one is honored, all rejoice together...”

Birth announcements have become big business.
It often begins with the first official photo:
The Sonogram - that blurry gray & white image
created by an ultrasound test at about 8 - 10 weeks.
It looks like a peanut with little appendages.
Then sonograms are made into cards
& sent out to family & friends
accompanied by little wording, just family name.
Recently I've saw a sonogram Christmas card
with the little peanut wearing a Santa Hat.

Next comes something called "The Gender Reveal".
It's for those parents who want to be surprised
but not surprised all the way to the end.
So their doctor is told to confide the gender
only to a designated trust-worthy friend,
who coordinates a special event - The Gender Reveal.
I saw one of a couple on a golf course
who both teed off simultaneously
and their golf balls exploded
in the appropriate gender color: in this case pink!
This is followed by a party & non-alcoholic drinks.

Obviously, all this is a modern phenomenon.
But there's an ancient, universal and most dramatic
birth announcement
that has found it's way into the biblical Christmas story.

It is when the baby starts kicking, squirming,
moving in the womb.

I remember the excitement.

Its when the baby starts feeling real - alive.

Immediately it makes parents start interpreting -
extrapolating.

If they kick at night perhaps they're a night owl.

If they kick after dinner they don't like certain foods.

If they really kick - they're going to play soccer!

Luke's Gospel is the only one that includes this in-utero
drama between Elizabeth and Mary.

Perhaps it's because Luke's Gospel is so women friendly.

But, if you'll excuse the pun, this story

is one of the most PREGNANT symbols for the true
meaning of the birth of Jesus.

To me it shouts, "The birth of empathy"!

The dictionary definition of empathy

is having a kindly awareness of the feelings of others
and being compassionately affected by them.

Doesn't that describe wonderfully
the interplay between Elizabeth and Mary?

Can't you see those infants reacting to each other
from within their respective wombs
as a symbol for what should be born in us -
a Christly reaction called empathy?

Dr. Erin Leonard, PhD & psychotherapist helps us
sharpen the meaning of empathy, by saying,
**“When a person has empathy they resonate with how
the other person feels.”**

And without a doubt, our little bible vignette
is a story of empathetic resonance,

*When Māry greeted hēr, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped.
Suddenly Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed
loudly, 'Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'”*

And doesn't that comport with how the apostle Paul
describes the Christlike reaction of a faithful church?

*If one suffers all suffer together;
if one is honored, all rejoice together...”*

Now we human beings are built to react to others.
In all of us there is a spiritual tuning fork
that vibrates one way or another,
causing us to react to others and our world.
And given the division, violence & injustice
in our world - could it be more clear
that we dearly need a universal birth of empathy.

But alas, Empathy is up against 2 main adversaries.
The first is ANTIPATHY.

Antipathy means reacting negatively
to the feelings and plight of others.

Antipathy comes out in judgment, condemnation
and hard-heartedness.

**-“Why can’t they pull themselves up by their own
boot-straps?”**

**-“If they had worked harder, studied harder,
perhaps gone to church & been better Christians
they wouldn’t be in this predicament.”**

**- “They shouldn’t be getting welfare.
They’re only lazy and milking the system.
And my tax dollars are paying for it!”**

Antipathy happens all the time.

We see it personally when an abused person
abuses others.

We see it collectively in certain political views.

We see it socially - in how certain races,
certain religions, certain nations,

who were once persecuted, once enslaved, once exiled
turn around and perpetrate the same pain on others.

But there’s a 2nd adversary to Empathy besides antipathy;
and believe it or not - that’s sympathy.

Now haven’t most of us have been taught

that sympathy is a good thing?

But again I turn to Dr. Leonard who fine-tunes things,

“When a person has sympathy” he says,

“They have pity on someone else.

Down deep they LOOK DOWN on that person.

(But) When a person has empathy,

they see the other

as an equal human being and of common worth.”

Our biblical in utero drama between Elizabeth & Mary emphasizes that commonality.

Those two babies in the womb are pure;

untainted by the world’s prejudice or superiority.

Both are bless-ed children of God.

In closing, let me remind us that today is

Christmas Traditions Sunday;

a favorite for many of us

because we love taking an historic review

of the many symbols and rituals

that make Christmas so rich and meaningful.

But, amidst all our worship services and town parties,

and family traditions

we mustn’t forget the core reason for the season:

The birth of Empathy.

And Christmas is indeed rich in traditions of empathy.

The various Santa characters throughout western cultures derive from real historic people

like Nicholas of Myra, in ancient Turkey,
- a kindly monk who lived around 280 A.D.
renown for giving away his inherited wealth
and traveling the countryside
helping the poor & sick.

Or, Good King Wenceslas,
not actually a king, but a real 10th C. Duke of Bohemia,
who, in a time of tribal violence,
and heavy poverty upon his citizens,
took the throne from his mother, a greedy Queen,
and tried to reign in the spirit of Christ.

Wencelas was best known for his acts of kindness.
And it is documented that many a night,
he & a servant would travel his kingdom anonymously
and bringing alms and benefit
to widows, orphans, those in prison and afflicted
by need, and especially on St. Stephens Day,
which was Dec. 26th.

Duke Wencelas wished not to be called by his title,
but instead, known as “Father of all the wretched.”

Then there was a Dannish postal clerk named
Einar Holboell, who was inspired by a wave of empathy

seeing so many European children suffering from polio and lung disease.

In 1904 he birthed the idea of selling decorative stamps to decorate Christmas packages and mail.

His idea was endorsed by the Danish Royal family and enough stamps were sold to build a new children's hospital in Copenhagen.

That same wave of empathy swept over a woman named Emily Bissel, of Wilmington, Delaware. She read an article about the Christmas stamps idea in Denmark, and, in 1908 organized a similar project that raised \$3000 to help build a tuberculosis hospital. It was so successful that she notified The Red Cross who took her idea nation-wide, and thus began a tradition of empathy lasting decades; named "Christmas Seals", that raised millions for The American Lung Association.

And right here in our little corner of Bennington County the beloved tradition of Community Sharing is strong as ever.

Over the 25 years I've lived here, I have watched Community Sharing grow and grow. Supported by hundreds of people,

it provides food, clothing, gifts and certificates
to many hundreds of the most needy families
in Danby, Pawlett, Rupert, Wells, E. Dorset and Dorset.
And the program is conducted with such care
and consideration, that it is not a program of sympathy,
but a program of empathy.

And over and over, I hear organizers and helpers
say, **“My true Christmas spirit begins with
Community Sharing.”**

So friends, in our exhausting pursuit
to honor our many Christmas traditions
we mustn't forget the spirit that birthed them all.
The spirit of Empathy.

Prayer of Pastoral Care Advent 3 December 11, 2022

Give thanks to the Lord, our strength and our salvation. Let us offer our prayers to God.
Following: God, you are in our midst, our response is: **renew us in your love.**

Lord of life, you call us to prepare the way for your kingdom's reign by living lives bearing fruit worthy of repentance. You lift up before us a vision of a world that is shared and fair, where needs are met and no one is outcast. Baptize us afresh in your Spirit as we pray. God, you are in our midst, **renew us in your love.**

We pray for the nations of the world, both allies and enemies, for their leaders and their people. With the onset of winter, we pray especially for the people of Ukraine. Sustain them amidst continuing bombardment on sources of electricity and water. In this anniversary week of the attack on Pearl Harbor, we pray for peace in our world, and for all who live in fear of violence, threats, and false accusations. We rejoice in the return of Brittney Griner to family and home, and pray for those still held in captivity in Russia. God, you are in our midst, **renew us in your love.**

We pray for all who suffer from natural disasters, from hunger and cold. Lead us to share our food and our resources with them. We pray for the earth from which we draw our health and strength, our inspiration, and for all living creatures in whose community we live. For the frail, the sick, and all those whose hands grow weak, may we help them with gentleness and caring. God, you are in our midst, **renew us in your love.**

As we honor World AIDS Day, and the witness of the National AIDS Memorial Quilt, we would support those in the LGBTQ community who are under attack both here and abroad. We thank you for the bipartisan passage of the Marriage Rights Act. We pray for all in this holiday season who are without loved ones, and for those who are estranged from their families. God, you are in our midst, **renew us in your love.**

We lift before you, G God, those on this church's immediate needs list.

O God, we can trust in you and not be afraid. Lead us in songs of praise that you are in our midst. We pray through Jesus, who baptizes us not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

OFFERING

Let us bring to God our offerings, with thanksgiving that God provides more than enough for all. Let us give, as each is able, for the benefit of Christ's church and God's world.

*DOXOLOGY

*PRAYER

Gracious God, in gratitude for all that you have given us, we bring our offerings to help feed a world hungry for healing and hope; in the name of Jesus. Amen.

History of the Christmas Carol *It Came Upon A Midnight Clear*

We so often think of Christmas Carols being quite old
and of European origin,
but some of the loveliest we sing were written right here in America.
Our 1st one was written by Edmund Hamilton Sears,
who grew up just south of us in the small town of Sandisfield, Mass..
He went to Union College, in Schenctady, NY
and went on to Harvard Divinity School,
and for the rest of his life, devoted himself to small town ministry.

What is unique about this hymn is that there is no mention at all
of Christ, or the newborn baby Jesus, or Messiah..
And yet, when we sing it,
we never seem to miss any of that faith-vocabulary;
because this song is filled with the spirit of Christ
and its application to the real world in which we live.

Rev. Sears wrote it for his real-world - as Civil War was brewing,
and our nation was divided by black-lives mattering.
It reminds us that Jesus came to change and heal social wounds
and manifest the angel's proclamation to the shepherds.
"Peace on the earth, good will to all."

Let's sing ~~It Came Upon A Midnight Clear~~ *It Came Upon A Midnight Clear*,
and LET US WORSHIP GOD.

History of the carol, What Child Is This?

As with so many sacred Christmas carols,
their tunes began in very secular ways and places.

Some tunes came from drinking songs.

This one began as a love song about a couple missing each other.

The famous tune Greensleeves, was featured in Shakespeare's play
The Merry Wives of Windsor!

But as a sacred song its message is entirely different - almost opposite.

The words were written by ^{William Dix} an insurance salesperson by the name of
William Dix, an Englishman who moved to Glasgow, Scotland.

He loved to write poems about his devotion to Jesus
and some of them were quite popular.

But the one that became our next hymn,
was inspired by Dix's own near-death.

At the age of 29, he became suddenly and seriously ill
and as he thought he lay dying,

the lyrics of this song came to him and made him well again.

Let us sing the entirety of #162, What Child Is This?

History of the carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem

Our next carol was written by two Americans, the famous Rev. Phillips Brooks, minister of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and his organist, Lewis Rednor.

The spirit of the carol was birthed when Brooks visited the Holy Land, on Christmas Eve, 1865.

He was profoundly inspired and later said,
"Standing so close to the spot where Jesus was born,
as the whole church was singing,
I myself could hear angel voices praising the Savior's birth"

Three years later, he wrote a little poem for his Sunday School based on his memory of his visit.

He gave the poem to his organist, Lewis Rednor, hoping he could put it to music by Christmas Eve.

At first, Rednor struggled to find a melody, but on the night before Christmas Eve as he was sleeping, a melody came to him in a dream.

The next day he jotted it down and that night, the Sunday School choir gave the inaugural performance of what has become one of the world's most beloved songs, O Little Town of Bethlehem.

Let us sing it too, #144 vs. 1, 3 & 4.

Advent Candle Lighting Ceremony Third Week of Advent

FIRST READER:

As we gather around the Advent wreath today, we rejoice that Christmas is a time of prayer and of open hearts when we sing songs of joy. Christmas is a time of worship—the moment when the busiest of us pause in wonder. Christmas happens when God comes to us in love through Jesus Christ and fills us with love for all humankind.

Let us gain LOVE as we hear the words from the first letter of John

“God’s love was revealed among us in this way;

God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and

Sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Beloved, since God loved us so much,

we also ought to love one another.”

We light this candle to proclaim the coming of the light of God into the world.

With the coming of this light there is LOVE. Such great LOVE helps us to love God and one another.

Family member lights candle (using acolyte’ candle lighter)

Light the pink candle then light two purple candles

Family member reads closing prayer

O God, we thank you that Jesus showed your love for every person—babies and children, old people and young, sick people and those who were strong, rich people and those who were poor. Come to us in this Advent season, and give us love in our hearts for all people. Amen.