

Sermon 12.27.20 Dr. Janet Loman

Luke 2.22-40; Isaiah 61.10-62.3; Psalm 148

### "God with Us"

Once upon a time - or before time, actually, before there were clocks or calendars or Christmas trees - God was all there was. No one knows anything about that time because no one was there to know it, but somewhere in the middle of that time before time, God decided to make a world. Maybe God was bored or maybe God was lonely; or maybe God just liked to make things and thought it was time to try something big.

Whatever the reason, God made a world - this world - and filled it with the most astonishing things: with humpback whales that sing and white-striped skunks that stink and birds with more colors on them than a box of Crayola crayons. The list is way too long to go into here, but suffice it to say that at the end, when God stood back and looked at it all, God was pleased. Only, something was missing. God could not think what it was at first, but slowly it dawned on him.

Everything he had made was interesting and gorgeous and it all fit together really well-- only there was nothing in the world that looked like him, exactly. It was as if he had painted this huge masterpiece and then forgotten to sign it, so he got busy making his *signature* piece, something made in his own image, so that anyone who looked at it would know who the artist was.

He had one single thing in mind at first, but as he worked God realized that one thing all by itself was not the kind of statement he wanted to make. He knew what it was like to have company, and company was definitely better. So God decided to make two things instead of one, which were alike but different, and both would be reflections of him - a man and a woman who could keep him and each other company.

Flesh was what he made them out of -flesh and blood- a wonderful

medium, extremely flexible and warm to the touch. Since God, strictly speaking, was not made out of anything at all, but was pure mind, pure spirit, he was very taken with flesh and blood. Watching his two creatures stretch and yawn, laugh and run, he found to his surprise that he was more than a little envious of them. He had made them, it was true, and he knew how fragile they were, but their very breakability made them more touching to him, somehow. It was not long before God found himself falling in love with them. He liked being with them better than any of the other creatures he had made, and he especially liked walking with them in the garden in the cool of the evening.

It almost broke God's heart when they got together behind his back, did the one thing he had asked them not to do and then hid from him—from *him!*—while he searched the garden until way past dark, calling their names over and over again. Things were *different* after that. God still loved the human creatures best of all, but the attraction was not mutual. Birds were crazy about God, especially ruby-throated hummingbirds. Dolphins and raccoons could not get enough of him, but human beings had other things on their minds. They were busy learning how to make things, grow things, buy things and sell things, and the more they learned to do for themselves, the less they depended on God. Night after night he threw pebbles at their windows, inviting them to go for a walk with him, but they said they were sorry, they were busy.

It was not long before most human beings forgot all about him. They called themselves "self-made" men and women, as if that were a plus and not a minus. They honestly believed they had created themselves, and they liked the result so much that they divided themselves into groups of people who looked, thought, and talked alike. Those who still believed in God drew pictures of him that looked just like them and that made it easier for them to turn away from the people who were different. You would not believe what trouble this got them into: everything from armed warfare to cities split right down the middle, with one kind of people living on that side of the line and another kind on the other.

God would have put a stop to it all right there, except for one thing.

When he had made human beings, he had made them free. That was built into them just like their hearts and brains were, and even God could not take it back without killing them. So God left them free, and it almost killed *him* to see what they were doing to each other.

God shouted to them from the sidelines, using every means he could think of, including floods, famines, messengers, and manna. He got inside people's dreams, and if that did not work he woke them up in the middle of the night with his whispering. No matter what he tried, however, he came up against the barriers of flesh and blood. They were made of it and he was not, which made translation difficult.

God would say, "Please stop before you destroy yourselves!" but all they could hear was thunder. God would say, "I love you as much now as the day I made you." but all they could hear was a loon calling across the water.

Babies were the exception to this sad state of affairs. While their parents were all but deaf to God's messages babies did not have any trouble hearing him at all. They were all the time laughing at God's jokes or crying with him when he cried, which went right over their parents' heads. "Colic," the grown-ups would say, or "Isn't she cute? She's laughing at the dust mites in the sunlight." Only she wasn't, of course. She was laughing because God had just told her it was cleaning day in heaven, and that what she saw were fallen stars the angels were shaking from their feather dusters.

Babies did not go to war.

They never made hate speeches - or littered - or refused to play with each other because they belonged to different political parties. They depended on other people for everything necessary to their lives, and a phrase like "self-made babies" would have made them laugh until their bellies hurt.

While no one asked their opinions about anything that mattered (which would have been a smart thing to do), almost everyone seemed to love them, and that gave God an idea.

Why not create himself as one of these delightful creatures?

He tried the idea out on his cabinet of archangels and at first they were all very quiet. Finally a senior archangel stepped forward to speak for all of them. He told God how much they would worry about him, if he did that. He would be putting himself at the mercy of his creatures, the angel

said. People could do anything they wanted to him, and if he seriously meant to become one of them there would be no escape for him if things turned sour. Could he at least create himself as a magical baby with special powers? It would not take much—just the power to become invisible, maybe, or the power to hurl bolts of lightning if the need arose. The baby idea was a stroke of genius, the angel said, it really was; but it lacked adequate safety features.

God thanked the archangels for their concern but said no, he thought he would just be a regular baby. How else could he gain the trust of his creatures? How else could he persuade them that he knew their lives inside out, unless he lived one like theirs? There was a risk. He knew that. Okay, there was a *high* risk, but that was part of what he wanted his creatures to know: that he was willing to risk everything to get close to them, in hopes that they might love him again.

It was a daring plan, but once the angels saw that God was dead set on it, they broke into applause - not the uproarious kind but the steady kind that goes on and on when you have witnessed something you know you will never see again.

While they were still clapping, God turned around and left the cabinet chamber, shedding his robes as he went. The angels watched as his midnight blue mantle fell to the floor so that all the stars on it collapsed in a heap. Then a strange thing happened. Where the robes had fallen, the floor melted and opened up to reveal a scrubby brown pasture speckled with sheep and—right in the middle of them—a bunch of shepherds sitting around a camp-fire drinking wine out of a skin. It was hard to say who was more startled, the shepherds or the angels, but as the shepherds looked up at them, the angels pushed their senior member to the edge of the hole.

Looking down at the human beings who were all trying to hide behind each other (poor things, no wings), the angel said in as gentle a voice as he could muster, "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." And away up the hill, from the direction of town, came the sound of a newborn baby's cry.<sup>1</sup>

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That baby, of course, was Jesus. Forty days after Jesus' birth, the Spirit of God whispered in the ear of Simeon and led him to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Simeon had expectantly waited all his life to see salvation come to Israel, and he knew that nothing was impossible with God. He had memorized the words of Isaiah when he was a child, and anticipated that God was surely creating something new. He went as quickly as his old legs could carry him. He arrived at the exact hour to see Mary and Joseph come into the Temple to worship and dedicate their first-born son to God.

Mary and Joseph were obedient to the LORD; for when Mary had been visited by the angel Gabriel, and was told she would bear a son and name him Jesus, she responded, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Simeon immediately recognized the importance of this tiny child. Joy and amazement filled his heart as he tenderly held the baby who was destined to be the hope of the nations, who would teach his people how to live-- in love, reconciliation, and peace. A Savior had arrived in the form of an ordinary, yet quite extraordinary child-- a miracle that only God could accomplish! At last, Simeon gazed into the bright and wondering eyes of Jesus, the light of the world. Now fulfilled and content, he was prepared to die in peace.

The prophet, Anna, was a descendant of Jacob and Leah of the House of David, and was devoted to her Jewish faith and the Temple. Her faith and work consumed her days, yet she was spiritually open to all the possibilities that God's daring plan would bring to the world. With gladness in her heart she went out of the Temple to proclaim the mighty wonders of God to everyone in her community who would listen. She became a light for those who did not yet believe, so that God's glory would rest upon the people.

Both Simeon and Anna lived in hope, despite hardships or uncertainty in their lives - just as the little boy who planted the carrot seed never gave up on the promise that one day a beautiful carrot top would appear from the darkness of the earth. The boy waited and waited to see the plant appear, while others doubted or laughed as he carefully watered the seed and tilled the soil; yet he remained hopeful and dedicated himself to his work.

God's promise of salvation for a new Israel changed the course of history: by the grace of God, peace was to spring up before all the nations. It would no longer be Jew or Greek, slave or free, man or woman . . . Jesus would teach us to serve all in love, righteousness and praise to God, who was, in essence, marrying the Temple with the Church.

God desires to be with his people and always hopes for the best in us, for we are little incarnations of Jesus, called to proclaim love and reconciliation. Only God fully knows our potential to do good things! Among all the creatures in the world, God loves *us* best of all. And God hopes we will love *him* best of all, too.

In the children's Christmas song, "The Friendly Beasts", animals provided gifts to the Baby Jesus: the donkey offered its back to carry his mother Mary to Bethlehem; the sheep gave its wool for a warm blanket; the cow offered its manger and hay for a soft bed; the dove cooed and sang to Jesus so he would not cry. These gifts of adoration were Creation's joyful response to God's Gift of Love to us.

What gift will you offer to the Christ Child? It is his birthday, after all.

Amen.

<sup>1</sup>"God's Daring Plan," a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor