

Christmas Eve Candlelight Worship
Saturday, December 24, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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God In the Imperfect

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

I'm guessing that, tonight, Mary and Joseph aren't the only weary travelers arriving just in time for Jesus' birth. They're not the only ones who've overcome major obstacles on the way to the Bethlehem event.

- Many of you have had arduous travel to get to Decorah - braving snow covered roads, delays, airport security.
- Others felt you had "miles to go" to prepare your house for guests.
- Some of you face health challenges or psychological hurdles within yourself or others that make it hard to be here tonight.
- Many of you have accomplished the equivalent of a super-marathon by getting your family ready and out the door, close to on time.

You made it and your presence is a blessing. Take a deep breath. Let yourself rest and be. Often just making it through from Thanksgiving to Christmas can feel like a major undertaking. Though we're constantly barraged with Muzac telling us it's "the most wonderful time of the year", it often doesn't feel that way. Grief rears its head, deadlines loom, the headlines are frightening, family dynamics get tricky- and Muzac never helps. Tonight know this, if you have felt a bit worn down on your way to Christmas, you are in good company with Mary and Joseph.

Nothing is particularly easy for them as they travel towards the birth of Jesus.

- They are engaged and expecting a child, *after* their marriage, when they learn Mary will give birth to God's son.
- Once Mary and Joseph come to grips with that startling news, they likely expect that Mary will deliver the baby at home surrounded by her mother, a midwife, other women. Instead, they find they have to walk for days to a faraway city right before Mary is to deliver the child.
- Well then, perhaps they can hope for a welcome with relatives in the city of Joseph's family? Apparently not.
- At least a room in which to deliver the child? - no, not even that. Mary gives birth outside, with only Joseph to help, and has to lay him in a manger- where animals eat.

Things are difficult, messy, complicated. Yet in the midst of all the struggle, God is born through them. God enters into the hardship, the chaos, and brings new life to them and to all the world.

God doesn't wait until everything is perfect. Instead, God enters in the midst of all the imperfection to be fully present with us in all that we face. Something that must have seemed a terrible hardship and very worrisome to Mary and Joseph - a child lying in a manger- becomes a sign of God's presence. An angel tells the shepherds, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." So, they go with haste and find the child lying in the manger and they know God has shown up.

The shepherds find God not in the ideal, the perfect, the extravagant, but in a messy stable full of hay. This, and other imperfect places, is where God is found. God is present in the manger, the office, the airport. God is present in the war zone, the hospital room, the tense or lonely house. God is there, God is here, bringing hope, bringing life. Even when we can't see God's presence, even when we feel forsaken, God is here. God is here in what is vulnerable and fragile - a baby in a manger, broken bread, communities of imperfect people, our tenuous faith.

God is with us on all our journeys and amidst all the obstacles that stand in our way. God is here; we are not alone. With that assurance, we can each be a healing and hopeful presence in our hurting world. We, too, can be signs of God's presence. "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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

This message comes to us tonight as it came to the shepherds long ago. There is good news of great joy for all people. Good news that invites us to see, with wide-open eyes, that God is here. Good news that sends us to be messengers of hope ourselves.

So let your song of joy arise. Share in the wonder of this night. Glory to God, and on earth, peace.

Amen.