

Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2022

Nativity of Our Lord

“Held Together”

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Beloved of God, grace and peace to you this holy night. Amen.

Let's all take a deep breath.

Kids, everyone, breathe in slowly and breathe out even slower. (pause) Amen.

It's good to breathe because there's a lot coming at us right now. For one thing, it took a bit to get to this place tonight. I don't just mean the physical place. I mean this emotional space, this logistical space, and that includes everyone: those at home and those in the building. Christmas Eve can be complicated. It's full of hopes, expectations, anticipation - kids you've been waiting a long time to open presents. There's the juggling of commitments, the navigating of so many viruses, family dynamics, and of course, the great Christmas Blizzard of 2022. We'll be talking about this one for decades.

There's a lot coming at us right now from all directions: the news of the world, challenges in our own lives, the hidden and the all too visible losses. There's a lot to carry. Yet still, to you, to me, to us this holy night - good news of great joy. Great joy comes to us at the very same time as everything else that's coming at us. That's what makes this story good news for us. Right in the middle of our messy, mixed-up lives, great joy is born. Great joy doesn't wait until we're perfectly peaceful.

At the end of the story of Jesus' birth, it may *appear* that Mary is perfectly peaceful as she ponders all the things that have happened. Luke tells us, "Mary treasured the words of the shepherds and pondered them in her heart." In English that word *ponder* can sound passive and peaceful, meek and mild. Yet the word Luke uses, the word that we hear in English as *ponder*, in Greek is *Sumballo*. *Ballo* means throw and *Sum* means with, or together. So, there's this sense of all these things being thrown together. I can imagine Mary's mind racing over the last months and all that has been thrown at her:

The angel Gabriel's visit.

Joseph.

Her cousin Elizabeth - John leaping in Elizabeth's womb.

Mary's fierce and humble song of hope, resistance, and justice.

The news of the census which means even more taxes.

The powers that be and all the ways they impact her daily life.

The stress of travel, crossing borders and boundaries.

The uncertainty and desperation in Joseph's voice.

The baby Jesus coming.

The exhaustion and relief.

That verb, *to ponder, to throw together*, shows us Mary is holding all of this in her heart. She's not passively having a moment, but actively carrying everything that is coming at her: joy *and* exhaustion, stress *and* peace, hopes *and* fears. Mary experiences all of it, holds it all. The good news is that

Mary doesn't have to hold it all together herself. A savior is born for her, for us. "Do not be afraid, for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born ... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." A savior is born, God in human flesh. Forgiveness cries out. Hope breathes. Tonight, this holy night, God is born. The baby that Mary holds and protects and worries over is also the very God who holds her, who holds you with such tenderness.

With so much coming at her, she is carried in the arms of love.

With so much coming at you, you are carried.

Amid the joy and exhaustion of your life, the stress and peace, you are held together by God who is born among us.

Tonight, when the "hopes and fears of all the years" meet, good news of great joy is born for you.

Thanks be to God.