

Christmas (Year C): 24 / 25 December 2018

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

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Isaiah 9: 2-7

Titus 2: 11-14

Luke 2: 1-20

Psalm 96

'Twas in the moon of winter-time
When all the birds had fled,
That mighty Gitchi Manitou
Sent angel choirs instead;
Before their light the stars grew dim,
And wandering hunters heard the hymn:
"Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born,
In excelsis gloria."

The Huron carol, as it is better known, is a 17th century song written by a French priest who was a missionary to the Huron people of Canada. Though the current English version relies on the Algonquian language, its message still resonates, especially around the name Gitchi Manitou – which means Great Spirit.

For many Christians of European descent, the imagery the First Nations people use is lost on us. After all, these are not biblical metaphors. Rather, the images are grounded in creation and the natural world, much as Celtic spirituality is. For the Native people of these lands, Gitchi Manitou is not simply an omnipotent spirit, but the imminent manifestation of the

Source of Being – the Creator of all that is. Is it such a stretch then to understand the correlation between Gitchi Manitou and the Spirit that hovered over the waters of chaos calling forth creation? I can fully appreciate how Fr. Jean, the missionary, saw two different cultures intersect and from this be able to communicate God's indwelling with creation through Christ Jesus.

However, it is so easy for us to trivialize Christmas, to romanticize its familiar story that we forget its significance. Christmas has a meaning that transcends commercialization and the frenzied pace of life that the holiday's entail. We've rendered Luke's birth narrative to a warm and fuzzy greeting card imagery, we've tamed the radical nature of the pivotal event to charming songs of little drummer boys and softly mooing –cooing farm animals. What happened that night so long ago was a paradigm shift that ruptures the privilege of the status quo and ushers in a selfless and self-giving love. That's the essential meaning of Christmas: Love came to dwell among us.

It came to dwell with us, not in the guise of privilege and power, but in the vulnerability of a child born into a family of little means or consequence. According to Luke's narrative, this child is actually born in squalor. This child's birth is heralded not to government officials or the wealthy, but to the lowliest of laborers, shepherds. Thus, the story of Christmas reminds us that in the midst of a world hardened by war and profiteering, in a political system that privileges the few at the expense of the many, we are given a glimpse of our true nature through the birth of a child. Not any child, but a child through whom our better selves will be revealed and whose light shines forth beyond time and history.

The in breaking of God's Love incarnated in Jesus is such that it disrupts accepted patterns of life. The normative structures that cast us into prescribed roles and expectations is shattered by Love's Incarnation. We not only recall who was born that night so long ago – that's the tamed rendition of the story. The more revolutionary understanding is that we also celebrate Christ's birth within us. That is the true gift of Christmas, the gift you won't find under any festive tree, but you will in the hearts of your friends and family, in the kindness shown by strangers, and the generosity of spirit that pervades this holy season. That is the

kerygma, the essential meaning of God's Incarnation in Christ Jesus: that Love came to dwell with us and within us.

Throughout Jesus' life this indwelling of Love will be manifest. It is heard in his sermon on the mount when he says, blessed are the poor, the meek, the humble; blessed are the peacemakers, the care-givers; blessed are those who mourn. It is heard when he says to his disciples that whatever you do to the least – the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the prisoner – you do to me. Scripture records this Love in the many times Jesus breaks bread with outcasts and the disenfranchised – the marginalized of society. The narrative of Love's indwelling finds its consummation when, on the eve of his passion, Jesus tells his followers: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (Jn 13.34-35)

It is that Love we celebrate this day. Love is what is born within us and to which we are invited to respond just as Mary and Joseph responded to God's invitation, just as lowly shepherds responded, just as foreign visitors from afar will respond. The ultimate gift of Christmas that money can't buy but is freely given to all is Love. Will we recognize it when it is born in our midst? Will we respond in an affirmative way? And will we share the gift of Love as abundantly as God has shared it with each of us? These are the questions the Incarnation asks of us, and the opportunity it gives for each of us to be our better selves – not just at this time of year, but throughout the year and in all aspects of our lives. That is the meaning of the radical in breaking of God's Love which disrupts our comfortable zones and shatters prescribed roles and expectations. Love came to dwell with us and within us. This is the gift we celebrate this night. The gift of the Great Spirit, the Gitchi Manitou.

May the blessings of this holy season be with each and every one of you, and may Love's light shine in your hearts and radiate outwards to those around you.