

Indeed tonight is a Holy night, a night when we embrace the coming together of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus. The culmination of all our preparations through the Advent season and before makes this a time when the Christmas spirit is made most real. Someone once said “I wish we could put up some of the Christmas spirit in jars and open a jar of it every month.”

I wonder what a jar of this Christmas spirit would look like. Would it even be possible to keep the lid on it, or if it would just explode? It is surely too big to can. It is a spirit that starts pervading our culture as early as October every year. As we get closer and closer to the 25th of December, for many, especially children, the excitement and enthusiasm build, the anticipation gets more and more exuberant, barely able to be contained.

Our Scripture reading tonight describing the multitude of heavenly hosts praising God in the highest is perhaps what this exhilaration looked like on the night of Jesus’ birth. The angels, not able to contain their praise, burst out in adoration, sharing the good news with the shepherds, urging them to go see this miracle, this promise of salvation fulfilled.

In many of our families, this is how we keep Christmas. We express our joy for God’s love by sharing. We acknowledge how much people mean to us by sending kind, thoughtful words in cards and letters. We demonstrate our love for friends and families by giving presents. We share hospitality with others through baking and cooking, hosting and attending parties. We proclaim to the world that this is a time to celebrate by the decorating of our homes, offices, churches and communities. We show our compassion for others by being especially generous with gifts and donations to those less fortunate. We witness to the good news of Jesus by spreading goodwill to all. These are wonderful traditions, and truly embody what makes up the Christmas spirit.

But there is another side to consider as well. If we were to open the jar of Christmas spirit, after all the big, bright, festive parts came exploding out, there would still be something left in the bottom. It is the smaller, quieter part of the Christmas story. It is the story of Mary and Joseph: Joseph who went up from Galilee, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, with Mary. And while they were there, Mary gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

This is the story we hear captured in the hymns like “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and “Away in a Manger.” It is a story that stands in contrast to the Grand Gloria of the angels, reminding us that God does not just come to us a big blast, a meteor shower of gifts and food and parties. God’s presence is more often revealed in small, almost imperceptible ways. In contrast to the glitter and glitz of the season, we need the silence, stillness and openness of heart to hear the whisper of God’s message.

This contrast was made real for me a few years ago at the annual Christmas Eve gathering of my husband’s cousins and all their families. We were celebrating with joyful enthusiasm, plenty of conversation, food and presents, with the children anticipating the arrival of Santa, who somehow manages to show up at that party every year. Just before he was expected to come, in the middle of the festivities and excitement, my daughter was sitting in a quiet spot with my young nephew. She asked him what he was hoping to get for Christmas. Answering with wisdom beyond his years, this dear six year old solemnly replied that “Family is the best present.” He knew there

was something deeper, something important beyond the external trimmings and presents of the season. In that quiet statement of truth, he reminds us that people are so much more important than things, that being with loved ones is how we best experience the Spirit of Christmas.

Christmas celebrates God made flesh, God made real in our lives. It is in the ways we show each other love that God's presence is enfleshed. In the compassionate acts of kindness, in active, sympathetic listening, in the warm embrace of a loved one, in the words you just needed to hear spoken said at just the right moment – that's where we know God's presence. Sometimes it is the smallest of gestures, which can be so easy to miss beneath the big things going on at this time of year that we are truly reminded of what the Christmas spirit is. There are whispers of holiness trying to be heard amidst the clamor of excitement around this holiday.

The true coming of God happens in the small, little places. Jesus was not born in Jerusalem or in another important city. Rather, he was born in Bethlehem – an insignificant little town. The prophet Micah proclaimed “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth one who is to rule in Israel.” Micah mentioned Bethlehem of Ephrathah to distinguish it from the “other Bethlehem” the more important Bethlehem in another part of Judah.

When I hear this, I can't help thinking of Bainbridge. Here we have to say we are in Bainbridge *Township*, to distinguish us from the other Bainbridge, in southern Ohio, which has its name as its zip code and post office. But God became present in an extraordinary way in that small town of Bethlehem. And God becomes present over and over again in this small town of Bainbridge.

Daniel Simundson, in his reflections on the book of Micah says: “The small size of Bethlehem reminds one of a common biblical theme: When God is about to do something great, human estimates of status, size, power, and influence are completely irrelevant. In fact, God often deliberately chooses someone whom we would probably dismiss as the most unlikely candidate for carrying out God's mission.”

So here, in Bainbridge, in ordinary people like us, God's mission continues to be carried out. Any place where we extend God's love in any small way, the Word of God becomes flesh over and over again. Two thousand years ago, the almighty God of the universe was born into the world in an insignificant town in front of ordinary people in the form of a helpless babe in a manger. Softly, gently, God continues to be made incarnate, continues to enter our lives, beckoning us to notice the subtle, small ways God appears.

Tonight we will end our worship service with the singing of the hymn “Joy to the World”, carrying with us the exuberance of God's glory, the joy that we call The Christmas Spirit. May we also take a bit of the Silent Night with us, finding quiet, still places where the light of the spirit of Christmas can shine, where we can perceive the truth of God's love and grace made real. Amen.