

“Bending Near the Earth”

A sermon in the Advent sermon series

***“Tidings of Comfort & Joy—God’s Incarnation
Expressed in Beloved Christmas Carols”***

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- Colossians 1:15, 19-20 (Good News Translation) ¹⁵ Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the first-born Son, superior to all created things.... ¹⁹ For it was by God's own decision that the Son has in himself the full nature of God. ²⁰ Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's blood on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven.
- Luke 1:26-38 (Good News Translation) ²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. ²⁷ He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel came to her and said, “Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!” ²⁹ Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. ³⁰ The angel said to her, “Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. ³¹ You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, ³³ and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!” ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, “I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?” ³⁵ The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. ³⁷ For there is nothing that God cannot do.” ³⁸ “I am the Lord's servant,” said Mary; “may it happen to me as you have said.” And the angel left her.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: By the Incarnation God acts to “break in” on our world taking on our flesh.

Each Sunday of Advent and on Christmas Eve this year we’re taking a look at a different beloved Christmas carol. We’re looking beyond their familiarity to find their message about why the birth of Jesus changes our lives and gives us life.

Last week’s focus was the mysterious Advent hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Its text reminds us that we need a savior to rescue us, to redeem us, to “save us.” From what? From our instinctive desire to serve and satisfy our self-centered tendencies. We pray for Emmanuel – Hebrew for “God-With-Us.”

This week let’s take a look at one of the loveliest carols in the Christmas tradition, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.” Its poetry was written by a Massachusetts village pastor named Edmund Hamilton Sears. Sears was a member of the Unitarian movement but unlike most Unitarians he did believe in the divinity of Jesus.¹

His lyrics easily paint a vivid image of the biblical story of shepherds and angels on “that first Christmas night, with an unusual emphasis on the stillness of the world and its awareness

¹ H. Augustine Smith, Lyric Religion: The Romance of Immortal Hymns. New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1931, 183.

of the angels' song."² But the carol speaks of God's concern for our social condition, offering hope and help to what the carol calls "the weary world" laboring "beneath life's crushing load."

To appreciate this carol's primary message, though, I want to remind us of a common aspect of religious architecture. I invite you to think of what follows as a Holiday Temple Tour.

This summer on our trip to the Indonesian island of Bali we visited numerous Hindu temples. They are historic, with some of the temples having foundation stones dating back over 2,000 years.³ And the temples are active, frequented not only by tourists but by the Balinese who offer ceremonial sacrifices of fruit, flowers and rice daily, whether at a large community temple or at a family's own modest shrine.

One of the oldest, largest and most important Hindu temples in Bali is the Besakih Temple Complex. Besakih consists of twenty-three temples on the slopes of Mount Agung, the largest volcano of Bali (still active, by the way; it most recently erupted a month before our visit). The temples, terraces and courtyards are built on a series of parallel ridges ascending the mountain. The temple buildings and pavilions have been arranged along a central axis of many flights of steps that guide one straight toward the mountaintop. I can only guess at the number of steps we climbed as we walked from the bottom to the top, but 2,000 steps would not be an outlandish estimate. For the worshiper ascending all those steps to offer prayer and ceremonial sacrifices, the message is clear: the divine is on high, and we dwell down here.

Another example more familiar to you, I imagine, would be found in Athens, Greece. Picture the majestic ruins of the stately marble Parthenon atop the rocky outcropping called the Acropolis (which literally translates as "the top of the city"). The Parthenon was built about 500 years before the time of Jesus. (Interesting fact: by the time the apostle Paul saw the Parthenon around the year 50 A.D., wars and earthquakes had already reduced it to the ruined state much like we see it today.) The Parthenon was built as a temple to Athena, the namesake goddess of the city. It wasn't coincidence that placed that temple there on the Acropolis, 500 feet above sea level. That lofty location sent a clear message to all who saw it: the divine is on high, and we dwell down here.

Another example – the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem – is one you can't see because the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, first in 587 BCE, and after it was rebuilt a few decades later it was destroyed again in the year 70 A.D. Whenever you see a stock photo of Jerusalem today, with a large limestone wall and the gold-plated Dome of the Rock glimmering in the sunlight, you're looking at the Temple Mount – the flat-topped Mt. Moriah where the Jerusalem Temple once stood. King David first built an altar on Mt. Moriah, and later his son King Solomon erected the Temple there.

To approach the temple precincts from the nearby settlement known as the City of David, worshipers and pilgrims would have to walk uphill, up rocky Mt. Moriah, up to the massive, 200-foot-wide steps ascending to the arched entryways that pass through the boundary walls.⁴

Those arched entryways led to more stairways that finally brought one up to the level of the temple grounds. "The Temple Mount was the Parthenon of the Jews," says [Israeli archaeologist Gaby] Barkay, describing how worshipers would have climbed a steep set of stairs to get to it. "You would feel every step of the climb in your limbs and your lungs."⁵ What's the message to the pilgrim or worshiper? "God is on high, and we are down here."

² Ibid. 184.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Besakih_Temple, accessed 12/3/2019

⁴ http://www.land-of-the-bible.com/The_Southern_Steps, accessed 12/3/2019

⁵ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-is-beneath-the-temple-mount-920764/#Tu3e17H51AwvRaBC.99> accessed 12/3/2019

If it still seems a little contrived that architecture serves to illustrate the distance between God and humankind, let me ask you this: why are there four steps leading from the area where you are (called the “nave”) to this raised area where the communion table is (called the “chancel”)? The message: God is on high, and we are down here.

By the way, it’s not just religious architecture which signals that commoners are below and the powerful are above. Picture the U.S. Supreme Court building or the U.S. Capitol, with flight upon flight of steps leading from ground level to the entryway. You get the message: everyday life is down here; power and authority are up there.

With those images from architectural history in mind, let’s revisit today’s Christmas carol that describes “angels bending near the earth” to sing a song of peace and goodwill, acceptance, welcome. The Greek word *αγγελος* (*angelos*) can be translated as “angels” or “messengers.” Angels are messengers from on high – and everyone knew that “on high” is where God is. But in Luke’s story of the shepherds living in the fields keeping night watch on their flocks, these divine messengers are “bending near the earth” – with a singing telegram message from God: “Peace on the earth, goodwill to all.” That’s God’s hope for humankind. “Peace on the earth, goodwill to all.” That message is God’s way of planting in our minds that desire, that aspiration, that goal. Through God’s messengers God “bent near the earth” to give us a blessing and a goal.

But that wasn’t all.

From wherever God dwells in those highest heights beyond the infinite flights of stairs separating heaven and earth... from wherever God dwells far above us, God took a never-before-seen action: God chose to “bend near the earth,” to come down to earth, and live and breathe and walk and work among us in human flesh: Jesus born in Bethlehem. God came to earth in Jesus the Son so that we might see and listen and learn and find the ability to live in ways that bring “peace on earth, goodwill to all.”

Following the way of Jesus – following the lead of Jesus – is our best chance of learning how to build and spread “peace on earth, goodwill to all.”

How do we follow his way? Here are just two possibilities for us.

First, by reaching out to befriend those who are strangers to us. Oh, we know the cautions about being wary of strangers, and yes, there are situations where you need to be wary of someone trying to take advantage of you. But there is also a lot of unwarranted suspicion and loneliness that easily could be dispelled if we were simply to reach out to one we don’t know and try to make a connection.

Jesus showed us that in the story of the time when he visited the town of Jericho. In that town lived a dishonest tax collector named Zacchaeus who wanted so much to see this renowned traveling teacher. Zacchaeus actually climbed a sycamore tree along the route just to catch a glimpse of Jesus. That’s when Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus perched on the branch overhead and spoke to the stranger. “Don’t stay up there too long,” Jesus told him. “Let’s get together at your house in a little while.”

Two weeks ago I saw two plays that both lifted up the power of simply trying to make connections with other people. Rocky River High School’s charming production of “Almost, Maine” depicted the residents of a small, isolated town in the state of Maine, a town called – you guessed it! – “Almost.” Like in most small towns, there were no “strangers” there; everybody knew everybody... except sometimes they didn’t *really* know one another, until they risked reaching out in friendship. Those small but courageous efforts helped spread goodwill and peace on earth... or at least peace in tiny, isolated Almost, Maine.

The other play that lifted up the power of simply trying to make connections with other people was the Tony Award®-winning Broadway musical “The Band’s Visit.” Based on an

actual event, “The Band’s Visit” tells about an Egyptian military band on a goodwill tour to a small village in Israel. The problem was that the Arabic-speaking Egyptians misunderstood the Hebrew-speaking ticket agent and ended up taking the wrong bus winding up in the wrong village. The Egyptian contingent had no choice but to spend the night in an Israeli village that wasn’t prepared to host them because they certainly hadn’t been expecting them.

Using broken English as their common tongue, the play reveals how barriers fell and relationships formed as these Egyptian and Israeli strangers strove to reach out to one another. As they talked, walked together, shared food, they began to realize those life experiences they had in common. That commonality of their lived experiences served to transform the uneasiness of being with strangers into respectful, appreciative friendships. As Jesus broke down barriers by getting to know Zacchaeus, following the way of Jesus is our best chance of learning how to build and spread “peace on earth, goodwill to all.”

Another path for following the way of Jesus is by choosing not to condemn. You know the story in the eighth chapter of John’s gospel about a time Jesus was teaching in the temple when members of the temple’s teaching faculty and some synagogue leaders interrupted him. They dragged a woman right in front of him and the crowd gathered around him. “She’s been caught in the act of adultery,” they announced to the crowd. “Our religious law is clear: she is to be stoned to death.”

Turning to Jesus they asked, “Teacher, do you have anything to say?” His response: “Whoever has committed no sin should throw the *first* stone.” At this, the leaders, one by one, slowly walked away until all her accusers had gone. Jesus assured the woman that he didn’t condemn her because of what she had done. “Go,” he told her, “but do not sin again.”⁶

Jesus was aware that she had made a mistake that hurt her, her family, others. But Jesus didn’t condemn her. He didn’t “pile on” with the accusers. He didn’t “bad-mouth” her. How many times do we have the opportunity to pile on those who are vulnerable – in the break room, in the hallway, on social media, during coffee hour after worship? But to advance God’s desire for “peace on earth, goodwill to all,” we could also choose to follow the way of Jesus and show mercy and patience rather than “piling on” with judgment and condemnation.

The carol “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” is a charming carol. It paints a vivid mental picture of God’s angelic messengers announcing never-before imagined good news: that in the birth of Jesus the Son God was choosing to “bend near the earth,” eliminating the distance between God and humanity. See Jesus. Learn from his way, so you can choose in your life to act in ways that contribute to bringing “peace on earth, goodwill to all.”

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⁶ John 8:1-11