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Christ Church Gardiner
Christmas Eve 2021

On this Christmas Eve, in this beautiful church where generations have gathered to worship for more than two hundred years, I am reminded that it is in the ordinary places, even in our little faith community here on the Gardiner Common that God shows up. Because God shows up wherever there is faith and hope and love.

In our Christmas story, God showed up in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago and changed the course of history.

Why Bethlehem? Well, as Luke tells it, a census—a call to register the people of the Roman Empire—forced Mary and Joseph to travel the 90 miles from Nazareth to the town of Bethlehem just as Mary was ready to give birth. Powers from far away set this journey in motion. The decree came down from Emperor Augustus in Rome, seat of the Empire.

But it is not in Rome, nor in Syria where Governor Quirinius resides, nor even in Jerusalem, the seat of King Herod, where the action of our story takes place. It is in the provincial town of Bethlehem where God breaks in. And that's good news for those of us living in our own small towns in central Maine or wherever you live. Because it means that in the midst of ordinary life, the Creator of the world breaks through and changes everything. God becomes human and we find him lying in a manger. As this child, Jesus, grows, he will be fully human. He will have no special privileges...nor will he escape our human weaknesses of hunger, weariness, fear, and even death.

How could this be true that our eternal God deigns to take on our human limitations? This is the most improbable of truths, and yet it is the truth that we proclaim every year at Christmas. The truth that God is indeed with us. A truth that is made known in the small village of Bethlehem. A truth that brings hope to our world. Even in times of darkness. Even during a pandemic. Even during times of devastating climate disasters like the tornadoes in Kentucky and the Midwest.

The power of hope that comes from a place of believing in “God with us,” has been on my mind a lot over the past couple of weeks. As many of you know, I am from Western Kentucky...right in the area where the devastating tornadoes hit two weeks ago, killing more than 70 people, including at least seven children, and displacing hundreds. My family was spared, and many of them have been helping their neighbors in the aftermath. Each morning since the tornadoes hit, I have turned on NPR in the kitchen, like I always do, but now listening most intently for the latest stories about those affected by the tornadoes. When the journalists interview someone from Mayfield or Dawson Springs or Bremen, and I hear their voices...I am transported home. I know that accent. I know those turns of phrase. I know those people because we have a common history. What has amazed me about the stories they have shared about surviving, mourning the dead, grieving the destruction...is that there is such hope and

faith tied up in it all. And there's love. Love for their neighbors that have been quick to help in any way that they can. Yes, the government has stepped in and federal funding will be necessary for rebuilding. Yes, people from all over the country have donated money for food and clothes and shelter and Christmas gifts. But I imagine when I hear their stories, that it is the relationships within their community, tested and strengthened by disaster, that give them the courage, faith and hope to move forward. It is the relationships built in those ordinary places, where God breaks in.

Ordinary places like Western Kentucky. Like Central Maine. Like Bethlehem.

How will we make space for God to break in where we live? In the communities we know and love and the relationships we build there? Creating that space for God to break through is not always easy. In our current pandemic crisis, it is tempting to be frustrated and angry and resentful. To place blame. To take a partisan stand. How do we instead reach out to our neighbors and look for a path forward that balances care for the community, priority for the vulnerable, and our human need to be together?

The answer to that question isn't simple and the path forward won't be smooth. Not when it comes to the pandemic or the myriad of other problems our world faces like climate change, racial injustice, poverty, violence and more. We'll need to build and strengthen the relationships in the ordinary places that we call home. Relationships that when tested, don't break but give us the faith, courage and hope to work for a better future.

What the birth of Jesus shows us... in that little town of Bethlehem, among the livestock and lying in a manger with worried and poor, but faithful, parents looking over himand the shepherds rushing in to see for themselves this baby that is to be king...

What ALL of that shows us is that something as simple as the birth of a baby, of parents gazing on him in awe, of neighbors gathering to welcome the new child...speaks to our very soul. Because we long for the power of kinship, not force...the power of relationship, not kingdom. The birth of Christ speaks to our hearts and reveals our deepest longing for a world of love and mercy and vulnerability as revealed in this infant.

And this infant will grow up to show us the best of our humanity in Jesus. It is Jesus who teaches us that in the face of the imperfect and harsh reality of the world around us, we must still turn toward faith and hope and love. We must turn toward our neighbors. Because when God breaks into our world, into our ordinary lives, it is not to build a kingdom but to teach us how to be in relationship with one another. When God breaks into our lives, may we, like the shepherds, hear the angel proclaim, "Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." Hear the good news of great joy this Christmas Eve and may it live in your hearts all the days to come. Amen.

