

Sermon Christmas Eve

I read a story once about a dentist who had a lovely fish tank in his waiting room. Everyone who spent time in that room seemed keen to watch the fish swim around. One day the dentist noticed there was something wrong; the fish were not swimming around as usual. He contacted a pet store with “experts” but the help they offered made no difference. In frustration he said, “If only I was a fish, I could be there with them and show them how fish should behave.”

As you laugh think about the meaning of what he said. As the owner of the fish tank, he wanted the fish to do well and even thought about becoming a fish in order to help them live the way they were created to live. I invite you to reflect on the meaning of tonight, Christmas Eve, and maybe you can sense what God might have been thinking many months before the Incarnation – it might have been something along the lines of, “My people are suffering and need help. If I was with them, I would be able to help them.” God chose to do just that. God chose to enter our world at a time of challenge for the people God had chosen to be “God’s chosen people.” God had seen that they had strayed from God and their faith and commitment to God seemed to have diminished as far as we know from scholars and historians. But God made what you may think were unusual choices. God entered our world in the humblest of manners. God came as a baby boy, to a working man and his fiancée, they were neither high class nor had any religious authority. God chose Mary, a young girl to be the mother of this baby boy. God chose to be born as though homeless, the birth of this baby boy was at a time and place when the couple were away from their family and their village. Local shepherds, the lowest of any working-class men were the first visitors. Foreign astrologers were next; neither Jewish nor noble. If you think more about God’s choice for life with humans you can note that God in Jesus had no known educational success; he was not a religious leader such as a pharisee, Sadducee or scribe. He owned no home, had no wife and children, wrote no books for us to learn from and had no possessions or money. In other words, the trappings of what you think of as a successful life were all missing from the life Jesus led on earth. Yet two thousand years later more people know him as their savior, more people claim Christianity as their religion than any other religion. Amazing, by human standards but of course, it was God who did this.

Yes, God entered our world, and you have from the four Gospels an understanding of Jesus’ ministry, how he lived his life in ministry, loved God’s people, healed them, cared for them, recruited disciples whom he sent out in ministry and finally submitted to being crucified, died, was buried and on the third day resurrected from the dead. He ended his earthly ministry by ascending to be with God for eternity. For you, what is the impact of the birth of Jesus, the coming of God into our world? Has it changed your life, your way of living, your way of loving, your way of loving your neighbor as you love yourself?

That is all something to think about. Let me share a story about loving your neighbor; I think stories help us in our relationships with God and one another. You might have heard this story, but I think tonight is a night for stories. Patty was a priest in the Bronx and had been given the opportunity to revive St. Luke’s, a church which had been closed a while but in a busy area of NY the bishop decided it could reopen and she was ready and excited about the challenge. The sanctuary was in a mess and needed work done. She spent time in the neighborhood enlisting support and in November she and a team of volunteers started a clean up of the sanctuary of St. Luke’s. Gustav was one of the volunteers. Recently retired he came daily, and no job was too hard or beyond his willingness. The sanctuary

responded and by early December it was beautiful just as it had been before it had fallen into some decay. Patty and her team of volunteers had known they could offer worship in a beautiful space, and they announced it would reopen on Christmas Eve. But the week before Christmas a severe storm hit the area and a few tiles were dislodged from the church roof. There was some debris and the clean wall behind the altar was stained. The clean-up did not take too long, and a roofer mended the roof. But the stain - oh dear. The volunteers suggested different remedies, the best being they should buy a beautiful very large hanging of some sort and place it over the discoloration. But where would they find such a hanging, and one that was affordable too? A couple of days later Patty was in the market area and saw a stall with bedding. There it was – a large bedcover, hand-embroidered, seeming to be perfect as a hanging for her need. Yes, it was the right size, and it was really beautiful, and being in the market, it was affordable. The next day she and Gustav found a way to hang it and it looked wonderful. As she was leaving, Patty noticed a tag in one corner. She went over to read it. It just had the name Catalina Steiner. “Catalina Steiner,” she said aloud. As soon as she said it, Gustav gave a loud cry and half collapsed on to a near-by pew. “Oh!” he exclaimed, “It can’t be.” Pat urged him to come and see the tag with this name written on it. She gently asked him if he knew Catalina Steiner. He said it was his sister’s name. The next day Patty returned to the market and asked if the stall owner knew how he had come by the bedspread. He said it had come with a lot of items from a dealer who worked in the lower east side. Patty then tried to search for Catalina and found one woman with this name in that area. She told Gustav she would take him there the next evening. Imagine the joy when the old lady who answered the apartment door was in fact Gustav’s sister. Yes, she had let the large bedspread go as she no longer had need of such a large one but yes, she had made it long ago. They shared their stories. They had both come to the US as children after the WWII and somehow had been separated. Neither knew the other still existed. What joy. It was her diligence, her ability to make something beautiful and add her name that enabled the reunion to happen. Yet it was Gustav’s willingness to volunteer his time and energy that enabled him to be present when he helped Patty hang the bedspread so was there when the tag was read. He has showed love for God, love for all who would worship in that space, love for his priest and love for this sanctuary which he had realized could be beautified.

I read this story years ago. Is it true? I do not know but that does not matter to me. Is it a story full of truth? Yes, indeed. But for you, I hope you know that you too can make a difference in this world just as Gustav did. It may not be an old but beautiful bedspread that will connect you to someone special who wants to meet you, but what you do can make a big difference in the life of another. Jesus spent his life making a difference, connecting in the life of one person at a time. He is inviting you to do the same. So, this night I invite you to think a little how you might achieve that goal.

Jesus, God incarnate is here, waiting for you to invite him into your life. I hope you will say, “yes, come Lord Jesus, come into my heart,” tonight and every night each day of your life. Amen.