

Sermon Christmas Eve 2017
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-14

Let's take a moment to be still, quiet, to breathe and relax.
This moment of tranquility is brought to you by God.

Last week my friend Mike and I were talking about Christmas Eve. Mike calls me almost every Wednesday morning from Fort Worth and we talk about how things are going with “our souls.” We talk about what we are reading; we share concerns, feelings of frustration and inner turmoil, *and* feelings of peace and wellbeing. We listen together. We are spiritual friends.

I hope you have someone like Mike in your life—someone you can talk with about your faith, about your journey through this mysterious, beautiful and hazardous thing we call life—someone who smiles tolerantly when you speak nonsense, and someone who leans in with empathy when you share your feelings of failure, your pain or confusion—someone who miraculously accepts you for who you are . . . when you agree and are pleasant to be around, and when you disagree and are a pain in the . . . *neck*.

Last week Mike and I were talking about preaching on Christmas Eve, and I said, *“Mike, Christmas is the hardest time for me to preach. I have the hardest time writing a Christmas*

Eve sermon.” Mike countered, “I can’t believe that. I love preaching on Christmas Eve. It’s my favorite service of the year.”

We thought about that together for a few moments and I realized something. *“Mike, I think the reason I have such a hard time writing a good Christmas sermon is that I try too hard. I want to say something that touches the extraordinary experience and possibility Christmas means for each of us, for all of us, for the whole world. If I could just **get in the neighborhood** of this miracle—maybe even **point in the right direction** of what God did in Jesus—what God did and what the Holy Spirit continues to do in Jesus.*

“I try too hard to say something that will bring us closer to the God who loves us enough to leave everything behind to live with us—and to give us a life of breathless complexity, endless wonder, and inexpressible beauty.”

Recently it began to dawn on me that I didn’t need to work so hard. The story itself is powerful enough to break through the resistance many of us have developed to *new* ideas. That is what the story of Jesus’s birth is. It is an old story, but it is an everlastingly new idea. Sure we read about what happened in Bethlehem thousands of years ago, but what brings us here tonight is less about the details of that story than about what was unleashed on the world that day.

I still feel emotion when I read the story from Luke.
*While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby.
She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son,
wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn.*

* * *

And the angels say:

*Don't be afraid! Look!
I bring you good news—wonderful, joyous news for all people.
Your savior is born today in David's city.
He is Christ the Lord.*

I still feel emotion when I read the story, but far more important than the emotion it evokes at Christmas is how the story impacts every hour of every day.

We are all hungry for the Christmas miracle. The miracle of Christmas is that God comes to find us. God's presence is with us every hour. This is the way John tells it,

*The Word became flesh and made his **home** among us.*

That really is a remarkable thing. God became flesh, came to find us, and makes his home among us. Jesus was born to be flesh like our flesh, to find us wherever and however we are lost—*here* in this real world. I love the Christmas cards we receive every year—but the heartbeat of what really happens

at Christmas is not pretty like a Christmas card. The message of Christmas is not pretty—it is beautiful.

Last month, Robyn gave me a wonderful book with the surprising title, *Barking to the Choir: the Power of Radical Kinship*. Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest, wrote it. Almost 30 years ago, Boyle founded *Homeboy Industries*, the largest gang-intervention program in the world. I encourage you to buy and read this book. Story after raw, heartbreaking story will communicate the meaning and transformative power of Christmas in ways no Christmas Eve sermon can.

Boyle has dedicated his life to some of the roughest people in the world—and they have rewarded his dedication countless times over. His life is rich in experiences and friendships with extraordinary people—with *homies*, many of who have seen and experienced life at it worst—abuse, abandonment, addiction, violence, even murder. There is no sanctified nonsense in their lives. They live in the real, raw world, the world into which Jesus was born and his Spirit lives.

I spent a lot of time yesterday trying to choose one of the stories about the men and women in Boyle's program, and I finally realized I couldn't do any of them justice tonight. The stories are woven from whole cloth. Here, though, is a sampling for the flavor of the book.

God loves us whole and entire. A homie named Eddie explains it this way: “God is that person pushing the shopping cart and going through your garbage. Sometimes we don’t want him to go through our garbage, but he tells us he wants to. That’s how it is, I think. God holds our garbage and recycles it into love.” (28)

Another: *For a long time [Chuy] had been a big, bad gang member and drug dealer. “I was disgusted with **that** guy,” he told me once. “That guy.” Most of us can remember when we were “that guy”—not as spectacularly big and bad as Chuy—but “that guy.” One of Chuy friends said, “Chuy learned how to be loyal to his own life.” (31) Jesus found Chuy and offered him his real life—and Chuy took him up on it.*

One of the stories from the early chapters in the book shows how Boyle finds delight in life and the goodness of God in *everything*. It is one of the core teachings of the Jesuit order—that God can be found and experienced in *everything*.

I confess I am a little hesitant to share the story tonight, in this holy setting, but perhaps this is the best time and place to hear a word outside our sense of propriety. Indulge me and, maybe later—forgive me. Boyle writes:

Everyone has shorthand with their friends, those cut-to-the-chase expressions that indicate larger ideas that come from the mundane and the ordinary.

I'm on a train with my friend Mark, a Jesuit and Homeboy coworker.

A very large man comes ambling down the aisle. He already appears to be a number of sheets to the wind and is headed for the train's bar, hoping to add a few more.

But when he gets to our row, he stops. He stares straight ahead and then belches so loudly it produces gasps from the other passengers.

*It is the burp heard round the world. Couples are muttering, "Why I never in my **life**," disgusted, beside themselves with horror. The man then continues toward his destination. Mark turns to me and smiles. "Life's great," he says.*

*That's been our shorthand ever since.
"Life's great"—real life.*

That is an *Incarnation* episode in the life of two Jesuit priests. The Incarnation, the birth of God in the flesh of Jesus, is about *this* world, the world we live in. God is everywhere, in every hiccup and burb. Why do we get our noses out of joint so often—over the littlest things?

Because Jesus is born, we can be like Chuy. We can learn how to be loyal to our own lives—to the man or woman we

truly are. Because Jesus came to live with us we can come together and widen the circle of compassion and take down the barriers that exclude. When we are loyal to our own lives, we can come together.

Last week I decided I didn't need to work so hard on this sermon. I don't need to try so hard, because God is working so hard to get through to all of us with this *new idea*. It's the old story of the baby born in Bethlehem, but the idea nestled in the manger is *ever* new. There is an eternal light shining from the city of David—a light that reveals and awakens life in every soul. All we have to do is look and listen, sharpen all our senses for the presence of God in every moment of time.

On the canvas of a starlit night, in the soft lights of a Christmas tree, in the wonder and exuberance of a Christmas carol, in the faces of our children, in the touch of a loved one, in the kindness of a stranger, in shared pain and aggravation—in hiccups and belches—in *every* moment of *all* time—

Life is great!

Christ is born. In Jesus we know God is with us, really with us, in *this* life. God is with us and God is for us.

Merry Christmas. Life is great!