

O Come, All You Faithful!

Sermon for December 24, 2019

Christmas Eve

by Pr. Bea Chun

St. Francis Lutheran Church



*Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place,
which the Lord has made known to us.*

Luke 2:15

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come:

O Come, all you faithful! That's what we sang at the beginning of our service.

O Come, all you faithful. Who are these faithful ones who are urged to come? Do you count yourself among them?

Perhaps there are some people here tonight who say to themselves: Certainly, I am one of them, I am one of the faithful, or at least I try my best. I try to be as faithful as I can.

And some others might say to themselves: I am not sure. I don't even know what it means to be faithful, I don't know what it means to have faith, I would like to have some faith, but I don't even know how that works.

And others might say to themselves: Faith is about church, and I am not interested in church. Church is boring and repetitive; they always say the same prayers. But I do like Christmas, the music is pretty and the candle light is magical.

And others might say to themselves, Once upon a time I might have considered this faith thing. But then the church rejected me. The church turned her back on me, and now I am turning my back on the church.

And yet, the invitation continues to go out. It goes out to everyone, to everyone without exception. Everybody is invited, and those who feel like they don't belong, they are invited most urgently. In fact, the more you have been excluded, the more you are invited.

The shepherds lead the way. Generally they were considered to be the least faithful; they never came to any of the religious services. When others prayed and worshiped, they watched over the sheep. And what else could they do? Who would watch the sheep if they went away to the service? And yet, the shepherds were the first to receive the Christmas Gospel. The heavens opened

for them first. The angels sang to them first. And ever since the good news has traveled into the world, from each one to each one to each, and now, on this Holy Night, the invitation has come to you and me:

O Come, all you faithful!

So, then, let us go! But where shall we go? We go to Bethlehem. No, not the Bethlehem of 2000 years ago, and also not the Bethlehem which is now part of the occupied territory of Palestine - poor little town of Bethlehem. No, the Bethlehem to which we are called is a place deep in the heart of God.

And how will we to get there? There are no maps, there are no sign-posts, and there is no navigation system to help us. Each one has to find their own way. We make the path by setting one foot in front of the other.

Follow that which attracts you, follow what you find beautiful: beautiful people, beautiful art, beautiful music, beautiful colors, beautiful words, beautiful actions. God hides in those beautiful things. God has put this attraction into your heart to get your attention.

Also: follow your fears. Your fears can be an indicator that something has hit a nerve. Your fears tell you that there is a place where you are ready to grow.

Be curious. Ask many questions. Knock on many doors.

Sometimes there is just a shimmering something out there on the horizon, something that you cannot put in words, but it keeps calling you, it keeps calling and calling, until you travel towards it.

Follow your needs and your hungers. What does your soul need? What is your heart hungry for?

Here is a simple exercise you can do: Breathe out, and then don't breathe in, just wait and watch what happens: you will feel a need to breathe, a great need; after awhile your lungs will burn and scream for air, and then you have no choice but to let the breath back into your lungs.

This is how much our souls need God. But God is already there, always, just as our lungs are breathing, whether we pay attention to the breath or not, so God is present to us, whether we pay attention or not.

But tonight, on this Holy Night, we are invited to pay attention, to follow the hunger of our soul and see where it takes us.

O come, all you faithful!

How long will it take? Sometimes it will take a lifetime; and sometimes you arrive in the blink of an eye. For the shepherds the journey was surprisingly short, perhaps less than an hour, and when they arrived, they found themselves in familiar territory: They found themselves in a stable, a place

where they had been many times before, and it in this way they discovered that they had been in the right place all along, and all their lives they had been right with God and did not know it.

But for the wise men the travel was long and arduous, and when they thought they had arrived, they learned to their dismay that they were wrong. They were the wise ones, and yet, they had traveled to the wrong address. Finally, at last, they too arrived at the stable, and it was not at all familiar territory for them.

In this way we learn that traveling means letting go, letting go of many things, especially our preconceived notions of who God is and where God is and where God might be found.

Sometimes, when people tell me that they have a hard time believing in God, then I say to them: Tell me more about this God that you cannot believe in. And they talk about a ruler, a judge who is high up somewhere in an imaginary heaven, demanding impossible things and impossible beliefs, judging, distant, condemning. And I say: this God, this distant God, that you do not believe in, I don't believe in him either!

So, traveling means letting go of old patterns of thinking letting go of the shame that binds you. It also means letting go of old hurts letting go of grudges, letting go of the need to be right, the need to win the argument. So, forgive and let go. It is easier to travel when you travel lightly. Put some new things in your backpack: travel with patience, with kindness, with mercy, they are easy to carry.

O come, all you faithful!

Sometimes you will be so weary that you think you cannot go on; And sometimes you will be as excited a little child, you race forward until you are out of breath. Sometimes you have to take the road one step at a time. Sometimes you end up walking in circles, sometimes you end up with detours, and sometimes you will feel lost.

There will be companions on the journey; some will walk with us just for an hour, some for a season, some for a lifetime.

Sometimes you will be distracted by the business of life. You know what your distractions are. Sometimes you will be full of worry and doubt. Rest when you are tired, take a break, make room for quiet. Spend time among the trees, look up at the stars.

Sometimes you will have mysterious encounters, a deep peace settles over you from out of nowhere.

Sometimes there are tasks set before you: Feed the hungry. Speak up for justice. Visit someone who is sick. Do what you can. The Talmud counsels us very wisely: *Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not*

obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

There will be rest stations along the way. Places where we can regroup. It is my hope, my dream, that this little church – St. Francis Lutheran Church - serves as such a rest station, to all who come through the door. May God give us the grace to be a good rest station.

And then, one day, suddenly, you have arrived. You have arrived at the heart of God, and you receive a complete and unconditional welcome. Nothing of you will be found strange or unacceptable, there is nothing that you need to leave behind, no need to be shy or ashamed. you can enter just the way you are.

And what will you find when you enter? A child lying in a manger! And that child is you. You are the precious child of God, beautiful and perfect and lovely beyond what you could ever imagine. Above you the heavens are open, a thousand angels sing for joy, a radiant light shines all around you and you are held in love.

Stay there, in this radiant place, for as long as you like, and return as often as you wish, but also, go back into the world, and share something of your radiant self, because you were meant to be a gift to the world. It is a gift that only you can give. You are the child in the manger.

Glory to God in the highest!

Amen.