

Christ Church, Georgetown

Sunday, January 1, 2017, 11:15 a.m.

Sermon, The Rev. Kristen Hawley

When the angels had left...

Friends. We meet again, in another New Year, brimming with opportunities and possibilities. We meet again, in that in-between place, betwixt the celebration of Jesus' birth and our vigil for his coming again. We meet, dear friends, in that intimate pause between the manger - that sweet subversive birth of our God among the smells and sounds of a lowly stable, and our response as recipients of that ultimate gift of love and humility. Each year, marveling at the gift and pondering it, like Mary, in our hearts.

For so many reasons, both personal and shared, I have yearned this Christmas to be with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the beasts – packed into that dark stable, full of wonder and awe, kneeling at a feeding trough to behold the light of the world. Songs, poems, stories, plays and pageants have been written, sung and performed for thousands of years of the hope found in that barn by those of us whose hearts have been broken, whose fears have been made reality, whose faith has been tried and left wanting, whose cup runneth out instead of over. For darkness, disguised as loss, despair, fear, pain or loneliness, comes to each of us over time and the glow of the manger beckons us back into the mystery of love incarnate. It beckons us back between ox and donkey, shepherd and mother, to gasp again at the source and power of light and love, to gasp at God's gift to the world.

Some of you know that my family got a Christmas present early this year. Her name is Emmy. Emmy, now a 12-week old puppy, was my first attempt to redeem or, at least, enrich a year marked by loss for our family. And, though she has brought us much joy and a sweetness that was unexpected, not surprisingly... she was not able to lift the burden of grief entirely. Nor, I might add, could the friends, family, parties, songs, presents or liturgies that marked the last month. All good – some more than others - but none alone equal to the task of redemption.

And isn't that why we crowd around the stable each year? To be saved? To have our lives redeemed, our personal and shared darkness cast out by the light of Jesus, the babe in swaddling clothes – the one named, *God saves*? I cannot help but imagine, as I sheepishly try to push myself to the front each year – trying to get even the smallest glimpse of the face of the child that came to save me from myself – I cannot help but imagine a barn bursting at the seams with people of every walk of life pushing alongside me, forcing ourselves bodily toward the light emanating from the bundle of love in the trough. It's why you're here, isn't it? To be as close to that light and love as possible? To be surrounded by Word, worship, ritual and a room full of others seeking God, seeking redemption, forgiveness and hope? To kneel and catch a glimpse of the babe who came to lighten the dark recesses of our lives by joining us in the shadows, in the poverty of our lesser selves... who offers us - *our selves, our souls and bodies*, refreshment, redemption, and an unquenchable love by becoming love incarnate?

As Elizabeth reminded us during Advent, Christmas cannot be about giving before we empty ourselves and receive the gift of the Christ child. Friends, we know that redemption, hope, forgiveness and love cannot be found under the tree or in a new puppy. They cannot be found in working harder, climbing higher or self-reflection. Like the shepherds, we must leave our fields and flocks and head, with haste, *to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place*. For it is in a manger in Bethlehem that we meet our God and gaze upon his face and receive the gift that enables us to be Christ bearers, givers in our own right. Jesus, whose name we celebrate on this feast day – named by the angels, as *God saves*... Jesus - born among the meek and lowly, born in poverty and humility, born to bring light to his people

trapped in darkness. For only God can save us, only God can lighten those places of deep pain, fear and loss, forgive us our sins and redeem us to be the people of unity, love, humility and selflessness that Saint Paul reminds us, in his letter to the early church of Philippi, we were and are made to be.

O that the whole world might join in the adoration of Jesus, the babe. O that we all might experience rebirth in the birth of "he who saves." O that we might all enter this new year like the shepherds of the fields outside of Bethlehem – emboldened by our trip to the manger, hopes and joys rekindled by the light and gift of the babe and ready to live into this new year as bearers of God's light! I pray that you all make time this Christmastide to push your way to the manger, to gaze upon the face and light of Jesus and be redeemed. Your cup refilled, your sins, fears and grief washed away and replaced with hope. I pray that you find time, like Mary, to ponder in your heart the gift of Jesus to the world and to your own life. And, I pray that, like the shepherds, you proclaim the name of Jesus and make known in word and deed all you have experienced. When the angels had left them, the shepherds moved with faith and haste – may it be so, friends, for us. Amen.