

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 2:1-20

Isaiah 9:2-7

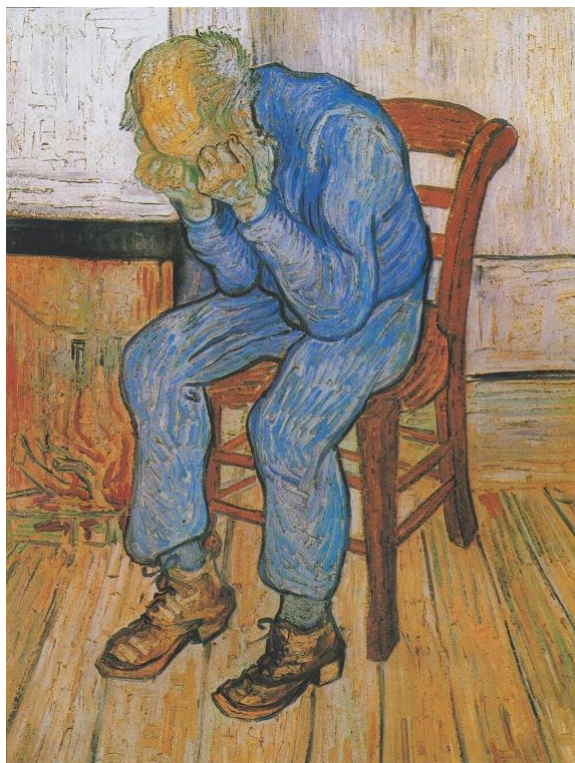
Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

December 24, 2021

Christmas Eve

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I want to start this evening with an image. You all have it in your bulletin. This is a painting by Vincent Van Gogh entitled Eternity's Gate. Van Gogh considered this to be a Christmas painting. As unlikely as it may seem, for the artist, this image depicted the heart of the Christmas message. ( I want you to keep this image in your mind this afternoon).

What do you think that message might be? Well, in a letter to his brother Theo in 1882, Van Gogh stated this about the painting:

*"...that one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the existence of 'something on high'...the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality...in the expression of an old man like that...something precious, something noble..."*

Vincent continued, *"simply the fact that the poorest woodcutter, farmer or miner can have moments of emotion and mood that give him a sense of an eternal home that he is close to"* (Letters to Theo, #288, #294).

**Take another look.** At first glance, we might see a man in pain or anguish. But we might also see a man in awe, bowing his head in reverence as he comes to terms with that something precious and noble. Whether he senses joy or despair, Van Gogh says that is where we are to meet God...at the center of our lives...offering ourselves to this awesome God that is with us. That is where the Christmas takes us...right to the heart of God and right to our own souls.

And so on Christmas Eve, we are to enter the barn with Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. We are to look upon the humble simplicity of the moment, like the man with his head in his hands. And we are to know that God has indeed broken through...directly to the heart of humanity. To us. Wherever we may find ourselves. That knowledge can overcome us. As Van Gogh states, *"I think I see something deeper, more infinite, more eternal than the ocean in the expression of the eyes of a little baby when it wakes in the morning, and coos or laughs because it sees the sun shining on its cradle. If there is a 'ray from on high,' perhaps one can find it there"* (Letters to Theo, #245, #292).

Perhaps you can find it wherever you are. That is what the Incarnation of God through the birth of Jesus Christ is all about. That is the Christmas message of God with us. In our joy and our despair...God is with us. In our sadness and in our celebration...God is with us.

So...where are you this Christmas? When you first saw the painting, did you see a man in pain or despair? Or, did you see a man in prayer, giving thanks, expressing tears of joy? Did you see yourself in this image?

The Christmas message is that wherever you may find yourself, God is there. And it doesn't take pomp and circumstance. It doesn't take any special clothes or a fancy home. It doesn't take any sort of accomplishment or tax bracket. It only takes you...just as you are. In a manger, at your job, in your home, in your pain and in your laughter, in your good decisions and in your bad. God just comes. Unbidden. To you.

That is powerful Good News!

When we sing Silent Night on Christmas Eve, we do two things...the first is that we sing the words...Christ our Savior is Born. We are lifting up through song the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand. Our King, our Messiah, our Savior has come to walk alongside us, to experience the fullness of our lives, and to teach us how to live as God wants us to live. Jesus came to not only save us from the consequences of our sin but to re-orient our lives. To save us from darkness, to remind us we are valued. To restore our souls and heal what hurts and guide us to new life. Christ our Savior is Born!

Imagine the man in our painting coming to this realization for the very first time. Bowing his head in prayer at the awesome gift of knowing his King and his Savior.

The second thing we will do during our hymn is to put out all of the light in the church...except for one single candle...the Christ Candle. From that one candle, we will light all of the other

candles, giving light to one another, filling the sanctuary with hope and joy. The significance of the symbolism of this moment should not be overlooked. We demonstrate through this simple act that God is with us, in our darkness, and God brings such abundant hope and healing to this world. And we call this gift Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus came so that we may know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is here, right here. And Jesus is going to show us exactly who God is and what that light means for our lives...in his compassion, in his unconditional love, in his courage, in his healing, in his teaching. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

Now, imagine the man in the painting coming to the realization that he is loved and cared for and valued. Imagine him feeling an overwhelming sense of joy that God is with him.

This is the light of the world. God incarnate.

So, wherever you are this Christmas...if you are dealing with sadness or pain and have your head bowed, overwhelmed by the things you are facing...let the light of Jesus' birth come into your heart, let it grow. And know that Christ your Savior will walk with you and bring you peace. Let that peace flow through you to strengthen you and give you courage.

If you are sitting there in awe at knowing God is with you, I want you to take a moment and simply give thanks. Give thanks for the opportunity to worship this incredible gift that came to be with us...Jesus, our Emmanuel.

Be in God's presence this year and let it renew your soul and heal what is broken. Let it grow your commitment to living as Christ would want you to live - loving your neighbor, caring for those in need, bringing hope to the lonely and joy to the grieving. Let the light keep growing and always remember that Christ our Savior is born for you and for me, wherever we may be. Christ is with us.

And, let us all say, Amen.