

"All Is Calm?"

**A Christmas meditation by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – December 24, 2023**

**Please Read:
Luke 2**

Loving God, still our hearts and minds. Help us to hear again your word of truth and grace for us, that we might live in and share your peace. AMEN.

The holiday season is a particularly clamorous time of year, isn't it? Parties, the hustle and bustle of shoppers, carols going on continuously in the background, bells ringing, impatient people waiting in lines, parking space anxieties, children excitedly leading their parents through toy stores pointing out all they wish Santa would bring them... all make for one of the loudest times of the year.

There are other kinds of noisy distractions to the peace we crave. The daily news is intellectually and emotionally disturbing: The political and military wars in places like Ukraine, Gaza, Yemen, Haiti, Iran, and Ethiopia. The howl of wildfires, hurricanes and flooding reminds us Climate Change is not waiting for us to figure it out. The primary election commentaries have been fairly bombastic this year and will only grow in shrillness. The hundred-million-plus men, women and children who are displaced in our world. And the gaunt and drawn faces of the homeless in our own cities, many battling addictions, separated from family and friends loudly remind us that all is not calm, all is not bright... And even when there are those rare *quiet* moments you hear a different kind of noise, the noise which clutters our minds - noise which we feel more than hear. Such noises can distract us from the message of Christmas; such noises can mute the chorus of angels singing good tidings of great joy...

You'll understand, then, why I feel our still-life nativity scenes give the wrong impression of that first Christmas. We may feel the whole world was frozen quietly in pastel serenity then, and we may wonder how such a serene and quiet event could have anything to do with our world and lives now...

I take comfort in knowing that it must have been noisy in Bethlehem that night so long ago when our Savior was born. Think of it - There was the edict by a hated foreign power, Caesar; the pushing and shoving of an overcrowded city with census travelers; the grumbling of the Roman soldiers in a foreign land and Herod, the paranoid and ruthless local tyrant; the grunting and snorting of barnyard animals; choruses of angels ripping across the night sky; the pitter-patter of shepherds coming and going; the desperate perspiring rhythm of birth. Indeed, it really couldn't have been much of a silent night that first Christmas!

The baby's cry that broke the night almost two thousand years ago rocked our world. A baby's cry, so ordinary, so unexceptional and commonplace, it went mostly unnoticed. There were so many other sounds. But it was that little baby's cry that showed us it is through the commonplace and ordinary that we can fall into somewhere else. This baby is what George McLeod called a "thin place." If you lean on this baby, you will fall into the living Word of God. In that baby's life, death, and resurrection, you will hear through the ages echoes of God breaking into our noisy world.

Franciscan sister Ilia Delio's describes how "the Christian message is that God has become flesh [sarx in Greek or "matter"] - not a part of God or one aspect of God but the whole infinite, eternal God Creator has become matter. The claim - God has become flesh - is so radical that it is virtually unthinkable and illogical. Christianity is the most radical of all world religions because it takes matter seriously as the home of divinity."

She goes on to write, "So does everyone have to become Christian to know the Christ? Absolutely not. Christ is more than Jesus. Christ is the communion of divine personal love expressed in every created form of reality—every star, leaf, bird, fish, tree, rabbit, and human person. Everything is *christified*," she says, because everything has the capacity "to express divine love incarnate... Jesus Christ is the *thisness* of God, so what Jesus is by nature everything else is by grace (divine love)... And "every single person is born out of the love of God, expresses this love in unique personal form, and has the capacity to be united with God."¹

It could be argued that it was because of this Jesus, this holy child, that you see around our world schools, hospitals, courts of law, declarations of independence and human rights. Because of this Cosmic Christ, we hold value for the poor, the weak, and offer compassion unparalleled by any other religion. Because of this infinite Infant, we gathered here are part of a community of people from all races, classes, nationalities, genders, across the ages, whose fearful silence has been broken by the good news of God's saving grace and forgiveness.

The good news of Christmas is that God still comes to us in the midst of our noisy world and our noisy lives. The angel's song of peace and love is heard over against the dissonant clamor and cacophony which too often overwhelms our lives. Jesus is the incarnation, the embodiment of the angel's song of peace and love. The noise of the world put him on the cross, but it did not stop the power of his healing love, his life-giving Word of grace for all people.

¹ Ilia Delio, *The Hours of the Universe: Reflections on God, Science, and the Human Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 105–106.

Thankfully, God does not try to out-shout the noise. God whispers the message of love and peace into the ears of those who have made quiet times and places in their lives. God did not try to yell over the noise. That is not God's way. God does not choose the noisy way to be revealed. Listen... Be still and know. In the silence of the soul, God whispers that you are beloved, that your life is a precious gift, and that you have a noble purpose.

And perhaps, as you listen, you will hear God's voice calling you to follow, to grow more into the person God has created and calls you to be, not simply to live for yourself, but to show God's love to others, to give generously, to forgive, to live according to the riches of God's grace, not simply to make more noise, but to live it in such a way that others might know of God's peace.

We normally have a time for prayer requests in our Sunday morning services, and lately, there has been regular calls to pray for Gaza and to remember the 20,000 plus people killed there in the last two months. You can sense the tension in the room. Ironically, sometimes out of the silence we experience with God, we discover that we are called forth to speak out, to speak a word of truth, of justice, of hope and compassion for those without a voice...

Throughout history, you know, and even to this day in many places around our world, the message of Christ is despised, and heralds of the Gospel are muted, by persecution and execution. We know silence is not always golden.

So, why do we sing here as do most congregations around the world, "Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright...?" We sing, with intimations of quietness, not because it is silent in our world. Rather, we reverently sing because there is something in ourselves and in the event of Bethlehem that points us beyond the noise of then and now to the Living Word, the peace of God offered to us at this table. We sing, with reverence, of this Word become flesh so long ago, with hope of our God who meets us where we are this night, and who will have the final redeeming word when Christ comes again.

And so we sing, with thankful hearts, of our Lord who comes in the midst of all the racket of our lives and world and offers himself to us here and now. I invite you, this Christmas eve, to be open to receive whatever God offers to you, to experience God's healing presence, God's shalom, God's peace. And you too, can quietly rejoice and sing, "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright..." Christ the Savior, is born.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.