

Christmas Day I (Year A)

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

The Rev'd Samuel T. Vaught
24 December 2019
Saint John's Church, Crawfordsville

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're here. Ready or not, to-do lists finished or not, it's Christmas Eve. Merry Christmas.

How do you celebrate this day? What are the traditions that you grew up with, the traditions you have acquired over time? Growing up in my family, we always watched a lot of Christmas movies—the classics, like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *White Christmas*, and some newer ones, as well. There's a Christmas movie that came out a little over ten years ago called *The Holiday*. I like this movie for several reasons, but I'll confess to you that I mostly like it because it's a sappy love story, and I have a particular weakness for those kinds of stories. Worse than that, the film itself opens with a sort of meta-narrative about love, spoken in voice-over by one of the characters named Iris. This is some of what she has to say:

“I've found almost everything ever written about love to be true. Shakespeare said ‘Journeys end in lovers meeting.’ Oh what an extraordinary thought... I am constantly amazed by [Love's] sheer power to alter and define our lives. It was Shakespeare who also said ‘love is blind...’ For some, quite inexplicably, love fades. For others, love is simply lost. But then of course love can also be found... And then there's another kind of love: the cruelest kind...” And she goes on to describe unrequited love, which will be a major feature of the movie's plot.

What is it about love stories that so thrills and delights us? Now maybe you don't like them as much as some of us do—or maybe you just won't admit it!—and that's okay. But like Iris I too am constantly amazed by the power of love to alter and define our lives.

Tonight is about a love story, too. And it's the most classic. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” And so begins the journey to Bethlehem, where there was no room in the inn. The baby's birth in a manger, among the animals. The fear and amazement of the shepherds who hear of his birth from the heavenly host. The baby's mother treasuring all these things, and pondering them in her heart. This is a love story of the highest degree. But it's not primarily a story about the love of Mary and Joseph—although their love and loyalty to one another is clear. And it's not really about the love of this holy child and his holy mother—although that too is abundantly clear. This is a love story about you, actually—about all of us, all of humankind. A story about God's love for everyone. A story that says most fundamentally, God loves you. God loves you. God loves you so much that God chose to be born among us, as a fragile, vulnerable baby. God chose the risk of first-century childbirth to come and share our life, to grow, breathe, play, laugh, love, to live and die as one of

us. Just like you. To live like you do so that through his death and through his resurrection you might live as he does. God loves you.

Why is this so hard for us to believe? This simple, fundamental truth of our existence—that God loves us? I will confess that in my short life there have been many times when this truth has seemed impossible. God loves me? Does God know me? Why is this so hard for us to believe? Is it because of what Iris pointed us to in that voice-over, that we so often fall out of love ourselves? Because we're so used to all sorts of things in life being unrequited, and not just love: dreams, job prospects, hopes for our children? Or maybe it's also because we live in a world that's really good at telling us that we're not loved. A world that seems to be getting better at telling that devilish lie that no one loves us—least of all God. A world in which advertisers at Christmas time say you can't know love unless you look like the model in the magazine, or have the latest Apple product in your pocket. A world in which the entire history and present moment of a nation like ours says to people of color your life doesn't matter as much as your white neighbors. A world in which angry crowds of people claiming to be Christians picket the funerals of LGBTQ folk with signs that say terrible things in God's name. A world in which we live for a time, and then leave, sometimes violently, and a world full of quite educated voices saying to you that's it—there's nothing else. What you see is what you get. It's into this world that Christ is born. It's to this world that God says no. No! Don't listen to them. I love you. Stop! Stop telling people that I don't. I love you so much that I was born like one of you—took on your flesh—born into your world of violence and anger and injustice and sin. I love you so much that I offered that flesh for your salvation, that I offer you my very body and blood, every week at this altar, so that there might be nothing between us, that I may dwell in you and you in me.

It's a simple story, actually. God loves you. And while it may be hard to believe sometimes, it's one that our world desperately needs to hear. If you believe that God loves you, and that if God loves you then God loves everyone, tell someone. Tell the story. Tell the story of the manger, and the angels, and the shepherds. Tell your story. Tell the story of how you came to believe that against all odds, God loves you just as you are. That is good news to proclaim. What would happen if every day for the next twelve days—the rest of this Christmas season—you told someone that God loves them? Who in your life, who in this community needs to hear that? Maybe it's our neighbors who live in the Montgomery County Jail. Maybe it's that friend or relative you haven't spoken to this year, that person you find really hard to love. Maybe it's the person who keeps the Walmart parking lot clear of snow so that you can rush in to get that last-minute thing. I'm guessing that we all wouldn't have too much trouble coming up with twelve people, if not more, who could really do to hear from us that God loves them.

This Christmas, let us embrace the love story that is Jesus Christ—that begins tonight with his birth. Let us embrace the truth that God loves each and every one of us. No matter who we are. No matter where we've been, or where we're going.

God loves you. If you believe that, go tell someone else. Merry Christmas.