

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Christmas Eve 2016
Luke 2:1-20
The Rev. Grayce O'Neill Rowe

Let us pray: Send, O God, into the darkness of this troubled world, the light of your Son: let the star of your hope touch the minds of all people with the bright beams of mercy and truth; and so direct our steps that we may always walk in the way revealed to us, as the shepherds of Bethlehem walked with joy to the manger where he dwelt who now and ever reigns in our hearts, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (John Wallace Suter)

The Herdmans were the terror of their town. When Imogene, Ralph, and Gladys muscle in on Sunday School and demand the leading roles in the Christmas pageant, they get their way because the other kids do not want to challenge them. Chaos reigns, as the Herdmans act out their unique version of what happened so long ago in Bethlehem. The Best Christmas Pageant Ever by Barbara Robinson, is the story of the Herdmans and it has become a well-loved Christmas story performed in many communities at least once during the weeks before Christmas.

I will never forget a production I saw in a small church several years ago. Gladys Herdman had the only speaking part as the angel who comes to announce, "Unto you a child is born!" The child who played Gladys Herdman absolutely stole the show. She came running into the church with her angel costume covered with streaks of dirt and wrinkles, her halo was missing and her wings were falling off. She was quite some angel. Anyway, this angel came running into the church yelling, "Shazam! Come and see! Come and see!" And she brought the house down. She was so excited about the news that she had to deliver that even though she forgot her lines she got the message across.

I must tell you that I was really moved by her Shazam! How perfect it seemed. And I have wondered ever since if her one, little Shazam sounded so great, I have wondered what even more Shazam's might sound like, what would it sound like if, say, all of the people gathered here tonight, what would it sound like if together you all shouted Shazam. So I wonder if you would indulge me, call it a Christmas present perhaps, I wonder if you would indulge me and on the count of 3 together shout Shazam.

Fantastic! And you know what, Shazam is exactly what we should be saying tonight. No, actually we should be shouting it tonight, we should be dancing in the aisles shouting Shazam, Come and see! Come and see! For tonight a truly incredible thing has happened; for tonight the light of Christ has come into our darkened and worried world. Tonight our God has once again come to live among us, to live as one of us. Our God who loves us so much has come to live with us and in us to teach us how to love. And that is such incredible news that perhaps the only thing we can say is Shazam!

Several years ago, the rock and group Foreigner had a hit record "I Want to Know What Love Is." The chorus of their song went something like this "I want to know what love is, I want you to show me. I want to feel what love is, I know you can show me." Now, I expect that this song was probably not written about God, but, if you think about it, isn't that what we each want? Don't we each want to know about love? Don't we each want to feel love?

And perhaps at no other time quite so acutely as now, during a time when the world does seem so dark. I imagine that you, like me, have been troubled this week by the daily reminders about the dangers of terrorist attacks. I have, you may have loved ones who are traveling this holiday, loved ones who will be in large crowds, my kids and grandkids will be in a huge cathedral. These reports have been disconcerting. And I know there is no need to remind any of you about the violence which seems to be taking over and controlling the lives of so many in our nation. These are indeed dark times.

For some of us gathered here tonight the darkness is more personal. Perhaps that person who just can't forgive you has stepped up her attacks on you. Or maybe you can't forgive yourself for something you have done or left undone. At this time when television tells us that we should all be so happy there are some people who are not happy, some people who are grieving, for some people darkness settles in.

And so our song might be, I want to know what love is. And I want you to show me. I know you can show me.

We gather tonight in part because we want to know what love is.

The Good News for each of us is that Christmas tells us. For our God who is infinite, who is unlimited, our God who is unnamable, unknowable, our God

became human for us, our God became finite, our God became limited, our God was named, our God became knowable. And all for the sake of love. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” God so loved the world, God so loves the world that Jesus is sent among us in the form of a helpless infant. God so loves the world that Jesus is born again in the hearts that will receive him to teach us how to love, so that we can love God back, so that we can love each other, so that with the power of this love we can rid the world of darkness.

We live that love each time that we reach out our hands to help another without thinking about what is in it for us. We live that love each time that we respond to hurt with forgiveness or maybe just by walking away. We live that love when we see someone who has less than we do and we can not ignore the person’s need. Or maybe it is offering your heart and your shoulder to a friend who is hurting.

The story is told of a young woman who had hoped to receive a truly expensive gift from a very wealthy friend of hers. In the days before Christmas she spent a lot of time dreaming about what this gift would be. Would it be a piece of jewelry? Or perhaps a vacation trip she so desperately wanted? Or a new outfit? Her list was endless. Christmas came and her wealthy friend gave her an envelope. In that envelope was a key with a note attached. The key was to the friend’s home and the note said “Anytime that you need a safe place, a warm bed, a listening heart use this key and you will be welcomed.” The woman was so disappointed. This was all that her friend was giving her? But as the weeks and months went by and the times came when she needed a safe place, a warm bed, a listening heart she realized what an incredible gift of love she had been given.

The darkness in our world tonight tells us that Jesus has not been born often enough. The darkness in our world tonight tells us that not enough hearts have been willing to receive him. The darkness in our world tonight tells us that Jesus must be born again and again in each of our hearts. And the Good News this night is that “silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.”

Where we will receive him the dear Christ enters in. When we will let it happen Jesus will be born anew in our hearts to teach us what we want to know about love, to help us to feel it, to help us to live it.

That is so incredible that all I can say is Shazam!

And so tonight and during the days and weeks and months to come let us let Christ be born in our hearts, let us let Christ teach us about love and as our lives are transformed by this love, we will bring light into this darkened world.

It will not necessarily be easy for we all know too well that there is so much that will try to trip us up, but if we hold on really tightly to the love that is born here tonight, to the love that is born in our hearts tonight, if we hold on really tightly to the joy of this night, the joy of this incredible birth, if we hold on tightly and let Jesus give to us the life and the love that we so desperately desire and that God so wants us to have, then we can live our lives in love and our actions, our love will be a message for all of the world to hear. Our actions, our love will be as though we are shouting, Shazam! Come and see, Come and see. Shazam! Come and be loved! Shazam! Come and love. Amen. Merry Christmas!