

Christmas Eve 2022 – Luke 2:1-20
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

*“If in your heart you make a manger for his birth,
then God will once again become a child on earth.”*

This 17th century poem was written by Johann Scheffler, also known as Angelus Silesius. Born and raised a [Polish] Lutheran, Scheffler was best “known as a mystic and religious poet. On converting to Catholicism in 1653, he adopted the name Angelus (Latin for "angel" or "heavenly messenger") and Silesius [from his birthplace]...While studying in the Netherlands, he began to read the works of medieval mystics and became acquainted with the works of the German mystic Jacob Böhme.”¹ Silesius published two books of poetry...and was often engaged in public controversy with both the Lutheran and Catholic churches because his poetry hinted at a quietest mysticism which asserts that the soul, when it attains deep quiet, can experience God directly — a notion [that] neither institution has been too fond of.²

I first became aware of this text as a lyrical chant when it was shared through Music that Makes Community workshop by my composer friend Ana Hernandez. Perhaps some of you remember singing it with me as a Gospel Acclamation several years ago. [SING] Chanting these words during Advent and Christmas can help quiet our hearts and attune our souls to God's frequency of Divine Love – the Love that was breathed into the cosmos by the Source of Love, the Love that became Incarnate as the Christ Child, and the Love that was implanted in each one of us as beloved creatures of God.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelus_Silesius

² <https://anahernandez.org/advent-reflection-i-if-in-your-heart/>

When we attune our souls to God's frequency of Divine Love, we shed human tendencies toward separateness and egocentricity. Rather than practicing competitive one-upmanship, we can celebrate the diversity of our distinctive blessings by offering them as collaborative expressions of God's love and grace as we participate in the manifestation of God's reign in the here and now.

Contemplative Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes: "In Jesus's consistent teaching and in Mary's Great Magnificat, both say that there are three major obstacles to the coming of the reign of God. [Rohr calls] them the three P's: power, prestige, and possessions" – obstacles such as domestic violence, war, and genocide; our insatiable desires for respect and admiration in the real and virtual realms; and humanity's over consumption of the world's natural resources to the detriment of habitats and other species.

Rohr believes that human "attachments to power, prestige, and possessions ... are the attitudes that numb the heart, allow us to make very egocentric judgments, and dull our general spiritual perception."³ And yet, "we tend to localize evil in our bodies more than in our mind, heart and spirit."⁴ Such attitudes tempt us to use our bodies in ways that break our union with God and with one another. According to Rohr, "Maybe that is why God had to become a body in Jesus. God needed to tell us it was good to be a human body. That is central and pivotal to the Christmas message."⁵ God's incarnation in the world, and in our bodies, hearts, and souls was and is the way for us to re-connect with the Source of Love and to transform our world with Divine Love.

³ Richard Rohr. *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media (2008), 82-83.

⁴ *Ibid*, 82.

⁵ *Ibid*.

The Incarnation which we celebrate tonight was not just a one-time event. God is always and everywhere coming to be with us and advocating for us to be God's messengers of love. As a practitioner of contemplative prayer, Rohr reminds us that, "When it comes to the gift of contemplation, every major religion in the world has come to very similar conclusions. That we are called to a transformed consciousness, a new mind or being born again a second time in some way. Each religion has different words for it and probably different experiences, but somehow they all point to Union with God. Religion is about union. Somehow, to live in conscious union with God is what it means to be saved."⁶ God comes into the world as Jesus the Messiah and Jesus the Christ-child who is Immanuel. Jesus is savior of the world because he reveals God's union with all humanity. Through the gift of contemplative prayer or contemplative chant, we can ponder how our bodies "are always the stable into which the Christ is born anew. All we can really do is keep our stable, honest and humble. And the Christ will surely be born."⁷

Many of you have been watching the TV series, *The Chosen*, with Priest Lynn. Recently she sent us two links to Nativity-related episodes on The Shepherd and The Messengers. In the latter episode, Joseph is depicted cleaning out a stable and Mary cleansing a manger to prepare for the birth of the Christ child, even while she is at term and starting to have contractions. Joseph is literally shoveling excrement and Mary is softening the cold, hard surface of a feeding trough with a blanket. Mary and Joseph work together to prepare a place for Jesus to be welcomed into the world.

⁶ Ibid, 80.

⁷ Ibid, 86.

In doing so, they are focusing on the main event, not getting distracted by what isn't available -- a nice room at the home of a relative -- but accepting what is and making the best of it; recognizing that God's messengers came to them on separate occasions to invite the Holy Couple into this sacred moment and to remind them that God is always guiding them to be messengers of God's love and grace. Each of us can be present to God's presence when we are gentle and humble of heart; when we find ways to be grateful for God's gifts of love and grace. Mary and Joseph were preparing a physical stable for Jesus's physical birth, all the while preparing a manger in their spiritual hearts for the birth of the Messiah. The physical stable of their bodies, and the spiritual manger of their hearts will need to be continually nurtured with prayer, and regularly cleaned out of all that is unnecessary as they live into the life which God has called them -- The Holy Family of God.

The Holy Family of God is not just Mary, and Joseph and Jesus. It is all of us in our diverse ways of being in relationship – more complex than biology, adoption, and friendship, and deeper than humanly created divisions of class, gender, ability, and race – that through our connection with the Divine One who created us to love, we may love and be loved as Christ loves us.

This moment of Christ's birth is full of uncertainty and challenges, but Mary and Joseph made the best of things because they knew that the Incarnation was not about them personally, but about God demonstrating God's love for all of humanity now and for ever.

Let us sweep clean the stables of our bodies and tend to the mangers of our spiritual hearts that we may humbly and joyfully embody Christ's light and love in the world.

[*Sing*: If in your heart you make a manger for his birth, then God will once again become a child on earth. -- Will you join me in singing?]

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