

**Christmas Eve 2018**  
**The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew**

One of the wonderful aspects of our Christ Mass service is that we open with the Prologue of the Gospel according to John, and listen to the birth narrative from the Gospel according Luke. The Prologue from John places the Word of God in context before time, before life, before being itself, and then unfurls the story of “The beginning”: of time, of creation, and of life and light. It is from this cosmic perspective that we turn to the Gospel of Luke and hear the story of the birth of Jesus— set in context with notable people like the Emperor Augustus and Quirinius the Governor of Syria; anchored in time with the historic marker of the first census,; and drawing us in as the child we have heard about all through Advent is finally born of Mary. It is in Luke’s up close and personal way that most of us live our lives, filled with references to culturally notable people like the President and the Governor, the common touch points of significant events, and the rich tapestry of the lives of people we know and love.

Most people love to hear Luke tell the account of the birth of Jesus, because it is warm and intimate, and filled with the kind of particulars that make the birth of God Incarnate as real for us as the story of our

own birth, or that of our children or grandchildren. We want to know that this was real, and that the smallest details were memorable. As Christians we incorporate the story of this birth into our lives because even in its sweet humanity we remind ourselves that it is **God** who was born in Bethlehem that night, wrapped in bands of cloth, and laid in a manger **“because there was no place for them in the inn.”** Luke incorporates the breaking in of the heavenly realm, reminding us not to get too comfortable with oohing and aahing over the new baby, for Jesus’ arrival is proclaimed to a group of shepherds by an angel of the Lord and the arrival of the heavenly host praising God. When the stunned shepherds hastily made their way to Mary and Joseph and shared their experience, all of them were left once again wondering just what it meant to have God enter their lives in this most extraordinary way.

Luke tells us that while everyone who heard the story the of the shepherds was amazed, it is Mary who **“treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”** Mary, who had also pondered what sort of greeting it might be when the Angel Gabriel came and shared with her the Good News that she was favored by God and would bear the Son of God, had many years to wait and watch as God’s promises for Jesus

unfolded. Even though the angel told her ahead of time that Jesus would be the One promised to sit on the throne of his ancestor King David and reign forever, how could she possibly know what that would mean—any more than she could fathom how the Holy Spirit would overshadow her so that Jesus would be the child of God? In the hymn **Mary Did You**

**Know** the lyricist asks:

**Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?  
Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the  
nations?  
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb?  
That the sleeping child you're holding is the great I am?**

In the movie *Arrival* linguistics professor Louise Banks is brought in as an expert to interact with a group of aliens who have appeared in 12 different places around the world. The aliens are terrifying to humans, who call the space ships heptapods because the aliens have seven legs and resemble giant squid. It takes a while, but Louise begins to understand the way the aliens communicate, which involves shifting her own perception of reality to include theirs. As those of you who speak more than one language know, the language we speak affects our understanding of time and construct of reality, and because these aliens are literally other-worldly, their way of understanding being itself is different than ours.

Louise, like Mary, is faced with beings from another realm who offer her insight into the future, but it is incomplete. On one level both women know what the future holds because it has been revealed to them. On another level, the future can only become real by living into it, by saying yes to what lies before us. For Mary, that yes meant trusting God, the words of an angel, and a story told by some shepherds. For Louise, it meant choosing a future that held both love and pain, for she could not have the love without the pain. You and I know that Mary's future is similar, for the story of Jesus leads to his suffering, crucifixion, and death before he is resurrected.

One has to wonder what we would do if we, knowing what Mary does not know, or what Louise does know, would choose to say yes under similar circumstances. The question is in many ways a real one, for any human future that includes love will also include pain. We might not have a narrative for how that love will grow and flourish, or how and when we will encounter pain and grief, but it is inevitable. The factor that tilts the scale in this decision, at least for Christians, is the profound truth that God knew exactly what would happen. With that knowledge, God chose to be born a human, to grow up in a family, to live and work in a small town, to engage in ministry in ever widening circles,

and to suffer and die for our sake. Why in God's name would Jesus do such a thing? I believe that Sarah Thebarger, a physician assistant who studied at Yale, worked in Togo, West Africa, and nearly died of breast cancer at the age of 27, is right when she says, "**Love will cost you dearly. And it will break your heart. But in the end, it will save the world.**" God created us, and all that is, out of love. And even though God knew that love would lead to pain and suffering, God was willing to say yes, even to being born as one of us in order to love us and save us. In return, God asks us to hear this story, again and again, to see it played out in our lives and the lives of those around us, and—when we are eventually asked to choose love— that we too will say yes.

Amen