

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2020
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20; Psalm 96

The other day, I was scrolling through Instagram, and I saw a photo of one of my son's friends looking very sad, and so I stopped to read her post. Here is part of what she said: *Yes I am posting this on purpose. No I don't think it's strange. Not sure about anybody else but lately I've been full on water works. As a person who tends to cry pretty easily, I found that there are a copious supply of tears lately. And so I would love to normalize crying.*¹

I think I know where my young friend is coming from. I, too, am a full-on water works these days. And let me say that Liz is not the only person that I have observed crying recently—on the Zoom screen, or in my office, or on the phone. I am not sure that I agree with Liz that we need to “normalize” crying. I rather think that we have “uncovered” crying as a normal response to the lives that we are living in this season of global pandemic and racial discord and political unrest.

I suspect that one of the reasons that there have been so many tears flowing around me and from me lately is that tears, of course, do not always come because we are sad. Sometimes they flow because of a memory or a thought that is so good, and sweet, and shiny, that our eyes have to match the gleam. At this time in this pandemical year, we have the sadness and worry caused by illness and threat of illness. We have the horror and frustration caused by violence, discrimination, and inequality. And we have the sweetness of our memories of times in the past, when we have celebrated this holiday of grace and joy, surrounded by those whom we love the most.

In the old movie *You've Got Mail*, which is itself a remake of an even older movie, *The Little Shop Around the Corner*, one of the romantic leads writes an email to the other: “It's coming on Christmas. . . and I really miss my mother. I always miss my mother at Christmas....” Well, no kidding. I have only to hear Meg Ryan say that line, and there I am, a full-on waterworks again, remembering my mother and this season of the year that she loved so much. Mom has been gone long enough that it doesn't really make me sad. The tears are sweet and shining, and my memories gleam with my mother's love.

But, in this particular Christmas time, right now in 2020, I have two brothers who are quite alive, but whom I haven't seen in over a year because of the pandemic—and there is a great-niece whom I have yet to meet, and so there is sadness and joy and I am crying again.

I hope that by now you have received permission to let your mind wander to what you are crying about this season. Is it a sorrow, or an outrage, or a sweet memory? Here comes a memory of my mother again, who would look at a holiday table and say, “I think I'll have just a little bit of everything!” Sorrow, and outrage, and sweetness are all mixed up in our

¹ Instagram: @realnaldi December 22, 2020

present reality. So, let the tears flow this rainy Christmas Eve. Let us rain from the inside just as much as it is raining on us outside!

It raises a question of course: what are we going to do with all of these tears? Shall we suppress them, remembering the lesson that our parents began to give us when we were old enough to reason: big girls don't cry! Or shall we hide them, go into the bathroom and turn on the water and wail in private? Or shall we walk around proudly, and even post a photo of our streaky faces on social media? Well, I agree with my Instagram friend that crying is quite normal, even, as she says, *It's good for you, and it's necessary, and it's natural.*

So, here we are, with tears in our eyes, good and necessary and quite **human** beings, on Christmas Eve in the middle of a global pandemic, not able to celebrate as we are used to celebrating and wondering what to do. Well, let me propose that this Christmas season is not only a time for sweet and gleaming memories, or even for memories tinged with sorrow. Christmas, as full of memories as it is, is not chiefly about memories at all.

Here we are, over two thousand years after the birth of the holy child in Bethlehem, so what could there be, beyond the memory of that sweet night? But there must be more, because we are drawn to gather, even when "gathering" seems impossible, we are drawn in by God's grace.

The angels told us what Christmas is all about. And King Herod worried about what Christmas is all about. Mary pondered it. Joseph dreamed about it. And St. Paul proclaimed it in his letter to Titus—an instruction manual about how to care for the people of God. Paul tells us, *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.*

Christmas is about salvation. God loves us so much that God becomes one of us. And that love for us, that desire for us, that **God**—SAVES us from our puny, sad, outrageous little selves. God gives us something to live for—or really, I should say, God give us someone—or even better—God gives us MANY ones to live for.

In the birth of the poor, vulnerable child—the scandalous son of the not-yet-married woman—God joins us here in this life. In our tendency to memorialize the event, with our nativity scenes and pageants and readings, we forget that Christmas is not merely a memory—Christmas is a promise.

God promises to reveal God's glory. That is the message of the angels. That is what frightened King Herod into a murderous rage. That is what drew the eastern sages to the animal's shelter. That is what drew Mary and Joseph into a family: the glory of God streamed out of heaven to save them and us. God became one of us to show us exactly how loveable we are. And there is more, because with God there is always more!

God revealed how loveable we are, and then charged us with loving one another. I do not need to tell you what hard work it is to love one another! Because first of all, God calls us to the work of loving one another while the tears are streaming down our faces. The work of loving one another is a constant charge—we are to be loving the people all the time.

And we are to be loving all of God's people. We remember that Mary welcomed the smelly shepherds and the fabulously wealthy and smart wise ones right into the scene to revel in the glory of God. Christmas brought salvation for ALL the people.

And we are to be loving one another wherever we are—tending the sheep in the hills, or tending our kids on the distance-learning school platform. Learning how to use Zoom to meet the new great-niece or following a star on an impossible journey. Giving birth in a stable, or wearing a mask and washing our hands while we wait our turn for a vaccine. Whatever occupation it is that keeps us busy—the salvation of God depends upon us loving one another while we do it.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. We believe that those words of the prophet Isaiah are God's promise to the people. The promise that the glory of God will be revealed to us. That is why we read this lesson every Christmas Eve. We make the connection between that ancient prophecy and the birth of the Baby Jesus. But imagine for a moment what it was like to hear that promise the first time—hundreds of years before Jesus was born—the people suffering under the reign of a faithless king—the hope of a future in God's favor dimmed by tears.

And God's prophet promises that the people will see a great light! And you know how shiny lights look through tears! The people can imagine that great light. They want it. They cling to the promise. The story tells us that there was a great star in the sky that lit the way to the Baby Jesus. And the people remembered the promise of the prophet.

Scientists tell us that the great light was probably a "conjunction"—the convergence of the sight lines of two planets lining up with us on earth, so that they look like a giant light in the night sky. There is historic evidence of such a conjunction around the time of the birth of Jesus. And there was such a conjunction visible to us here in North America just this week—the first time in 800 years that Saturn and Jupiter converged in our sight. Did you see it? I don't think that I did. Oh, I looked for it—but there are a lot of trees to the west of my house, and there were a lot of clouds in the sky on Tuesday. I saw a star, I think, or was it a plane? I asked my husband to come out of the house and look with me, and we saw something, but it was in the *northwest* sky, not the *southwest* sky, so we just don't know.

That sounds a bit like a metaphor for this pandemonical, uneasy time, doesn't it? The people are looking for the light. The people even believe that there will be light. But the clouds and the trees conspire to hide it, and the confidence of the people fades. But here is the thing: the light is just the metaphor.

It is the **love of God** that shines salvation upon us. And the tears in our eyes start to flow, until we are a full-on waterworks. The glory of God is revealed in the birth of the Baby in Bethlehem. And all of these millennia later, even in the midst of a global pandemic and social unrest, our salvation is born again, on this holy night when God's grace draws us together, and washes us in God's love, and strengthens us to reveal God's love to all.