

As Clear As It Gets

Christmas Eve 2011
Highlands Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 9:2-7 NRSV; Luke 2:1-20 The Message
Rev. Judy Hoffhine

Throughout this Advent season, we have observed the gradual revelation of God's essence to human kind. It all started so long ago. According to the Hebrew scripture stories, God tried in many ways to convince humans that God loved them. God sent a rainbow. God parted the Red Sea. God gave them food in the desert and pillars of smoke and fire to follow. The people kept wandering away from God.

So God sent telegrams by way of prophets. Isaiah spoke the clearest words, and his followers developed them into images that human minds could grasp, with lists of descriptions. A shoot from Jesse, the Prince of Peace, the one who suffers, the son of an unmarried adolescent, his name shall be Emmanuel, God with us, and so on. But the people either did not understand, did not believe, or were too busy.

Finally, God decided to send God's self. "So the Word became flesh; tiny and frail flesh, diaper wet and whimpering flesh, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, the son of Joseph and Mary." (from *Cloth for a Cradle* by the Iona Community, Scotland, p. 90) Even today we marvel that God should enter into and experience human life through that tiny baby, who would have to grow and mature just like the rest of us. He took his first steps, ate his first solid food, was potty trained. We know he had a mind of his own and wandered away from his family. He went through puberty and job training. Yes, God lived our lives.

Now, probably like many of you, I have wrestled with this idea that the great energy of the universe and beyond could walk this earth as a man 2000 years ago. I have read the writings of the skeptics. I have questioned. I have even been angry that if God chose to be so involved in life then, why not now; when so many people are hurting and when the members of our species seem to need such strong correction if there is to be survival and – just dream of it – peace. I often feel that this notion that God would fertilize an egg in order to become human is ridiculous.... But then, lo and behold, I am convinced one way or another that God is greater than my imagination and rationality, and that I dare not limit almighty God in any way. And maybe how this happened does not really matter anyway. The older I am, the more I realize I do not know – nor does anyone else. Mystery is a profound part of life.

As I leave parish ministry, I proclaim the faith as I know it. I am a Christian because I believe that Jesus Christ is the clearest expression of God's self ever revealed. I believe that God reveals God's essence in all manner of ways. These include other religions. In and through them, God's love and power are manifested, and people find their way to God through them. Those sects that seem to lead people away from God's fundamental wholeness and worship do not seem born of the creator, but rather of human greed and selfishness.

I believe God discloses God's self also through nature and creation, that matrix in which we live that we take so for granted and cannot fully understand. The magnitude of universes and the

complexity of the smallest units of creation are not fathomable to the human mind. Science delves into the mysteries of matter, and more questions and mysteries are born of their research even as they find answers. I am in awe of the relationship between science and religion. They go hand in hand. Ask quantum physicists.

I believe that God is revealed in our human relationships, which occasionally can be so filled with grace and forgiveness and love that we are left speechless or are overcome with emotion. One result is the expression of God through the arts – music, painting, sculpture, photography, dance, you name it! We simply cannot contain ourselves, and so our overflowing passion splashes onto paper, canvas, instrument, into the air.

Because we are mere mortals, we somehow know God in these ways intuitively. Some of us find it easier to believe and have faith in these inner movements and outward signs than others of us. One of the great gifts given to me at Highlands is the renewed willingness to trust the amazing, irrational ways that God is at work. The signs here have been clear. They have pulled together those who had eyes to see and ears to hear. Only God could have created the intersection of circumstances that would bring such hope, purpose, and energy.

In order to love us more clearly and intentionally, Christians believe that God became most clearly understood through the man named Jesus of Nazareth. In his life, he spoke and lived out God's intention for all of creation. Until then it seemed foggy and muddled. In the Hebrew scripture the writers portray God as exerting authority and then backing off from it, changing God's huge mind, trying new ways, even resorting to violence. These approaches are revised in the life of Jesus. We can actually read and observe what God wants us to know.

- We see a man who put relationships over rules. He simply loved everyone, and was able to really connect with those who were outsiders. Think of Zachaeus, the woman at the well, the lepers, and the little children.
- He illustrated his lessons with some of the best stories ever told. Think of the prodigal son, the ten lepers, the three men with money to invest, the banquet for the poor, the Good Samaritan.
- He healed people who had no hope for mental, physical or emotional health. Think of the child of the centurion, the blind man, the woman being stoned, the people with demons, the prostitutes and tax collectors. He saved them by loving them into being the people they were created to be. He helped them throw off the plagues that the world had put on them.

Through this Jesus, we know God and we know what God wants from us. Clarity of devotion, purpose, and lived out love and passion as Jesus lived.

I believe that Jesus was the Christ chosen by God, because the integration of scripture, experience, nature, and emotion come together – each verifying the truth of God. Unfortunately I am not one to trust blindly – I'm a bit like Thomas, I suppose. But over the

years I have returned again and again to heart-felt and hearty faith. In God alone could all that I have been privileged to witness be possible.

This Christmas, as we celebrate God's clear statement of intention, may we see beyond the sentiment, beyond the materialism, beyond tradition and custom to the great truth that God is here, we belong to God, and we have the choice to embrace God's truth and light; or falsehood and darkness. Tonight we give thanks that God is here and keeps loving us through it all. Amen