

“The Power of Friends”

Rev. Laurel Gray

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This song, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” is a call to bring the sacred into the grittiness of life. The word “Emmanuel” translates to “god with us” for, in this Christian Christmas story, the birth of the babe in the manger is the story of the sacred commingling with human struggle.

It’s a story that places holiness not in high offices to gilded palaces, but in the wild tender mess of struggle and birth and separateness.

It is also a story in which the spark of love, the journey towards hope, is experienced in small groups, physically separate from larger communities. It’s Mary and Joseph and Jesus alone in a barn, it’s the wise men traveling together through the night.

It is a fitting reminder on this Christmas Eve, as we gather together, not in a crowd of singing as we normally would, but in our small groups in disparate places. Feeling our connection as well as our separation.

For this is a strange Christmas at the end of a very strange year, one filled with so much grief and loss and loneliness. Cancelled plans and forgone traditions.

Normally, I would drive home from this Christmas Eve service to pack my suitcase and get ready to fly to my sister’s house in the morning. Last year I was actually taking down my tree on Christmas Eve and setting up a puppy pen, because I would be flying back to Massachusetts with my own Christmas miracle - a teeny tiny baby Henry.

Things are different this year. Henry’s twice as big as we expected, I’m not getting on a plane to go visit family. You probably aren’t either. And yet here we are. Gathered still, drawing together across untold distances.

It’s a season when we celebrate impossible magic, hope against hope, the stars that guide us through the dark night, and the wisdom of babes.

A few weeks ago, my sister texted me to tell me they’d seen a deer in their backyard in Minnesota. My nephew Isaac, who’s going to be five in February, saw

that deer and wisely assessed that it was one of Santa's reindeer. But it was alone and Isaac said, simply, that it couldn't fly away, because "it needed the power of friends."

And he's right. Those reindeer don't fly alone. None of us do, really. We are all so inextricably connected. And we can do so much more together than we can on our own.

The fact of our being gathered in this digital congregation for Christmas Eve, not shoulder to shoulder on creaking pews, is itself a reminder that we all need the power of friends.

For this was a year that we spent flattening the curve, when we closed our physical doors and opened zoom accounts, sewed masks and covered our faces so that we might protect each other and be protected in return. It was a year of letting go of any illusion that we can go it alone.

To overcome this pandemic, we needed, and still need, the power of friends.

And this Christmas story tells of that power. Of that sacred pull towards each other. For the wise men it's the star leading them to the child who will live a life of love and justice and humility.

This holiday season is strange for our physical distance. But what if that is the gift? The power of friends to keep each other safe? The love that chooses to stay home, to wear a mask, to wait until next Christmas to travel. Yes, on the surface maybe it feels limiting, sad, lonely even. AND it is born of the truth that we love this world and each other too much to risk putting people in danger. The journey out of this pandemic, the journey out of this time of physical distance, like the flight of reindeer, it's something we can only do with the power of friends.

And remember, this Christmas babe, born in a manger amidst danger and pain - this babe becomes the man who says the greatest commandment is to love God - and maybe you translate that to the spirit of life, or the world, or mystery, or wonder - the greatest commandment is to love the expanse and to love your neighbor as yourself.

It's in looking towards that star amidst the galaxies of wonder that the wise men find their way, find their way to this baby, this neighbor, this human life needing

care. This is the greatest commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. This is the power of friends, of remembering that we belong to each other.

I want to end with a prayer that one of our board members, Stacy Spies, shared. This is her adaptation of a prayer written by Moderator Richard Bott of the United Church of Canada. It's called "A Prayer for Putting on a Face Mask"

As I prepare to go into the world,
Help me see the spiritual nature of wearing this cloth.
Let it be a tangible and visible way for living love for my neighbors,
as I love myself.
Since my lips will be covered, uncover my heart
so that people would see my smile in the crinkles around my eyes.
Since my voice may be muffled, help me speak clearly,
Not only with my words, but with my actions.
As the elastic touches my ears,
remind me to listen carefully and full of care to all those I meet.
May this simple cloth be a shield and a banner,
And may each breath that it holds be filled with love.

Amen and blessed be.
Merry Christmas, friends.