

Good Morning! Let us pray... *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created And you shall renew the face of the earth. O God who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations, through Christ our Lord. May the words of my mouth & the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight...rock & redeemer of us all. Amen.*

Sunday after Christmas—"Compassionate Joy"

Isaiah 63: 7-9; Matthew 2:13-23

Friends, on Christmas Eve I challenged our focus to be not so much on the 'what' that happened... but on the why ... why did God do what God did in sending a baby to save the world.

Some would call it sending a lamb to the wolves.

Well, our gospel text today reinforces that sentiment. But...It isn't often that a text invites us to think about the kindness of God.

This morning's reading from Isaiah does just that and also invites us to consider the compassion and empathy of God.

Kindness, compassion, and empathy are words that often show up in the realm of psychology and/or self-help. They seem like human words, human attributes. But today we are reminded that these ways of being are also of God.

We can be thankful for this reminder as the text from Isaiah is set against the story of Mary, Joseph and the baby fleeing to Egypt as Herod orders the slaughter of innocent children. The world is full of people and systems, driven by fear and vengeance, who will do all they can to extinguish joy and light and love. The world can be so cruel; the world needs kindness, compassion, and empathy.

So it is that this week after Christmas we focus on Compassionate Joy.

It might be helpful to define what compassion is. In a book on self-compassion, professor and psychologist Kristin Neff writes, "Compassion, then, involves the recognition and clear seeing of suffering. It also involves feelings of kindness for people who are suffering, so that the desire to help—to ameliorate suffering—emerges. Finally, compassion involves recognizing our shared human condition, flawed and fragile as it is." Neff, Kristin. *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* (p. 10). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

This understanding of compassion is so consistent with an understanding of who God is and what God calls us to be. God recognizes and sees our suffering. As Isaiah writes, "In all their distress God too was distressed."

Time and again, over and over, we see God's desire to help us, to save us from our trials.

So, there it is... the why! In Jesus, God comes to us, enters into our shared human condition. Through Jesus, We are called to do the same for others.

We respond to the cruelty in our world with kindness, compassion, and empathy. We respond to the cruelty of our world with joy.

Against the evils of the world we shout, we cry out, we overcome. We join our voices with God, angels, and saints to usher in the kin-dom... the reign of God.

It will be easy this week to only focus on the cruelty in the world. We may be weary from the celebration and how easy it is to name all the "herods" of our time and age. The biblical tradition challenges us to live differently

Let us Remember all that we have learned about joy: elusive joy, hopeful joy, loving joy, unabashed joy, peaceful joy, incarnate joy, compassionate joy. Joy still abides, it runs deep and wide.

Look... Be attentive...Where do you see and feel joy: in your life, in your church, in your community, in the world? May we hold space for all of Joy, deep down in our hearts. Joy --- May it be so. So be it. AMEN.

“Angels Still Appear” — a poem by Ann Weems*From Advent's Alleluia to Easter's Morning Light: Poetry for Worship, Study, and Devotion.*

Angels still appear to those
 ready to receive blessings
 in spite of the barren impossibility of their lives.
 Elizabeth still recognizes Jesus
 and calls him Lord,
 receiving him to her heart,
 in spite of the distraction of her own blessing.
 Blessings still come
 To those who believe
 That nothing is impossible
 In the hand of God.
 Mary still gives birth,
 Not just every Advent,
 Mary still gives birth to this Child
 Who adverts into hearts,
 Unexpectedly and forever.
 Herods still live who
 would kill this Child,
 but Mary and Joseph still flee into the desert,
 and the night,
 to protect the One
 given into their keeping.
 Doors still slam in the
 Inns of this world,
 Herods still plot to kill,
 Deserts and darkness
 Still threatens our safety,
 But God still lives.
 In spite of war and terror,
 Mary gives birth
 To the Prince of Peace.
 In spite of hunger,
 Mary gives birth
 To the Bread of Life.

⁴ Ann Weems, *From Advent's Alleluia to Easter's Morning Light: Poetry for Worship, Study, and Devotion* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 29-30.

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