

## Looking Up Puts Love in Fear's Place

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Anny Miner-Pearson

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Trinity Episcopal Church, Excelsior

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How to celebrate my 50th birthday? That was the conversation circling between my mother, older sister and me a few decades ago. Of course, questions about birthdays were always good as far as I was considered, and half a century was a pretty BIG one, so how to celebrate? The idea which caught on was for us to rendezvous at Mesa Verde, the National Park in Colorado. None of us had ever been to the ancient structures built into the walls of a deep canyon. Many questions about who built them, why people stopped living in them. For a history-loving family, it was a unanimous choice - and besides there was an excellent restaurant in the lodge at edge of the canyon!

As more details became known, my sister began to waffle. In those days, it was possible to climb a rope ladder several hundreds of feet down the canyon wall and actually walk around the ruins. That's the part that made my sister hesitate. Lynn was deathly afraid of heights. Standing on solid ground and looking over a large open space made her nervous. Moreover, even the thought of stepping on wooden rungs connected by a hemp rope flipped her tummy and made her sweat. Yet, Lynn wanted to be a good big sister and this was for my 50th birthday, after all. After a couple of days, Lynn had a plan: when on the rope ladder, she would look up at me. With eyes on me, not on the ground below or the rock in front of her, she could get passed her fear. Her plan and her fear in place, the celebration of a birth could happen. Looking up in the midst of fear.

Looking up in the midst of fear. That is how we come this Christmas morning. Christmas Day, 2020, finds all of us and our world in a time unimaginable a year ago. Since last March, our gaze has become limited. Our movements calculated. Our interactions measured. All around the globe, covid has both drawn us together and set us apart. Even the start of a vaccine rollout doesn't bring us a full sense of freedom and ease. We are still afraid. It's hard to look around. It's hard to look up.

So, this Christmas Day, we more than ever hunger for the poetry and music of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." On this Christmas Day, 2020, we have never so needed those words. Along side Jesus 'birth story, we need John's vision of a cosmic Christ. John's Prologue is the good news with the power and promise to lift, widened and deepen the gaze of our seemingly limited and diminished world.

Also, on this Christmas Day, we more than ever need to hear the gospel in John's Prologue for we hunger to celebrate God's gift of coming to dwell among us. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."

Over this last year, we have come to know the meaning of the holy in human form with more than our theological head. While we are grateful for zoom, we are powerfully aware of its incarnation limitations.

We yearn to be physically present to others - our family, our friends, members of Trinity. We want to more than imagine the stranger's smile behind the mask. We long to gather - for worship, for established rituals of birth, graduation, marriage and death. We want to share a meal together. Personally, we haven't eaten with family or friends in our house since March 15th. We yearn to play, to move our bodies with abandonment. We are hungry to hug and be hugged.

Never have we so fully grasped the sheer beauty of God's creative, endless love-energy dwelling in a human body. Or how dependent we are for the countless number of other human bodies making our lives possible and safe - from mail carriers, grocery workers, medical personnel and first-responders. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

So, on Christmas Day, 2020, we look up at God's love filling and flowing from the farthest reaches of the universe. We look around at God's love as the glory of life dwelling in all those around us. In the face of our fear, God's love, like the arms of Jesus's cross, stretch above us and beyond us. And God's love encircles us in community of family, friends and stranger. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

Eighty years ago, Britain was in her own dark time. Alone and isolated, the tiny nation stood alone against the onslaught of Nazi Germany's nightly aerial attacks. Every evening all street lights were switched off. Heavy darkening curtains were pulled over the windows. Cars moved slowly without the aid of headlights. It was a dark time with no end in sight. As Christmas, 1941, approached, Churchill and his staff debated how to celebrate. Low morale would be boosted if the people could hear the usual Christmas Eve church bells. But, at this point, that sound had become known as an air attack warning. How could the bells be rung? Still, it was Christmas, so on that night the bells were rung. On that night, no enemy planes appeared in the sky.

And in the words of author, Eric Larson: "That night even though the blackout was still in effect, bonfires erupted throughout London, creating the familiar orange glow of fire into the sky—only now the fires were a sign of celebration. Searchlights played on Nelson's Tower in Trafalgar Square and perhaps the most moving gesture of all, the searchlight operators aimed their lights at a space just above the cross that topped the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, and held them there to form a shiny cross of light." Amen.

*(\*Quote from The Splendid and the Vile", page 502)*