

Christ Church + Washington Parish
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
6:30 Service on Christmas Eve, 2018

At the beginning of every Christmas Eve service here, we sing the same hymn, “O Come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant.” It assumes that everyone in the pew tonight is one of the faithful. Not just the faithful, the enthused faithful. The faithful who are here ready to adore the baby Jesus, eager to marvel and wonder at what God becoming human mean.

Certainly those at the first Christmas did not come with such lofty expectations. They had faith, but joyful and triumphant faith, I doubt. Mary and Joseph were at the end of a long journey and not one the angels had sent them on. They hadn’t expected to have a child far from home, but this is how it ended up and they had no choice but to make the best of it. Given a heads up by the angels, the shepherds came curious, excited to have a diversion from their boring routine perhaps, but not exactly joyful and triumphant.

They might not have had joyful, triumphant faith, but hey had faith enough. Faith enough to move through fatigue and fear. Faith enough to show up even when they’d rather be somewhere else. Faith enough to look and see even when they couldn’t imagine it being so. So if we were to re-work the carol a bit, perhaps we would sing, O come all ye faithful, exhausted and worried, O come all ye faithful, skeptical and hesitant, O come, all ye with faith enough.

If you look this night, you'll find something you don't find most Sundays in church. You'll find in this gospel story a God that asks nothing of his people, and people who ask nothing of their God. Often in Scripture when the divine and human mix, we have people asking God to intervene, to do miracles or answer questions or we see God challenging the people to change their selfish ways or we see both. But in this story, on this night, we see none of that. We see the people and God incarnate sheltered in the stable together, having no expectations of one another except to be with each other.

This isn't just unique in Scripture; it's unique in our lives. Our relationships are task-laden even the ones deeply rooted in love. We ask things of one another – our spouses, our friends, our children, our co-workers – we have expectations of how we will interact, what we will do or not do for one another. Who will cook tonight? Who takes the lead on this assignment? Will you please brush your teeth child . . . every night? We spend an amazing amount of our days responding to expectations upon us and putting expectations upon others. So how rare this moment is that we are invited just to sit and be with someone, let alone with God. No change asked of us. Nothing asked of God. What could possibly happen?

A story has been making the news the past week of an unlikely friendship. Shirley Wang's father, Lin Wang, was a Chinese immigrant who lived and raised his family in Iowa, and he had always told Shirley about his friendship with Charles Barkley. Charles Barkley was a famous basketball player in the eighties and nineties; he was an 11 time NBA All-Star – he was a big deal. Lin Wang saw pictures, saw his text chain with him (mainly her father's texts to Barkley

with lots of exclamation points), and heard his stories, but she had a hard time believing that her dad, a cat-litter chemist, had a real friendship. It wasn't until her father's funeral, when Barkley, 6 ft. 6 African American guy walked into the room and came to the mic to share stories about his friend, Lin. After getting over her shock, Shirley asked Barkley about how they became friends. He told her that they were the only two guys at a bar one night and ended up talking for several hours; they hung out the next few nights, and afterwards Barkley gave Lin his phone number and told him that whenever he was in Phoenix, New York, or Atlanta, call him. And Lin did. And they hung out – frequently over the years. Lin showed up at Barkley's mom's funeral in rural Alabama. And Barkley came to Iowa for his. Why were you friends? Lin's daughter asked Barkley. *Your dad was just really fun to be with.*

That night at the bar when they met, neither guy expected anything from the other but they had faith enough to show up and be open to what they found. And what they found was a conversation, a connection, a joy that strengthened them for many years. Certainly they developed expectations of one another, as minimal as they were, but the beginning – the delight they took in being with each other – grounded their relationship.

It is easy in our relationships – whether with spouses, children, friends – to forget the delight we once had in one another. It is even easier to do that with God, because so much of our relationship with God gets played out with us asking things of God and God asking things of us that we forget that it starts with love. God loves us. God showed up in Jesus to bring love near. We can delight in that love.

Whether you are a person of decades of faith or just a strand left, see this night as an invitation to stand in the stable and be open to the divine coming near. Be open to delighting in God that shows up in completely unexpected way and draws people into wonder at the simplest thing, a newborn baby. Know that God is delighting in you just being here.

May that delight renew or spark a relationship that can ground you in the year to come.