

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole CA

Christmas Eve December 24, 2020

“What is the Meaning of Being Lonely?”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good Evening, Good Christmas Eve. It has been a very strange and somewhat long year since our festive “Christmas pageant for all ages”; remembering the arch at our altar stairs and the smell of hay in the sanctuary, followed by a little Blue Christmas Eve celebration for those who stayed out a little later.

Last Christmas Day I received the call that the pianist was unable to come and we still continued on with a very simple a cappella Joy to the World Christmas celebration. Seems so long ago. In fact, a few were present among us, that are with us now only through their spirit.

While driving home the other night, of course with the radio on, the DJ began talking about the experience of living 2020 through music. She then announced that in the poll taken by the radio station, the number one song and lyrics people referred to about 2020 belonged to one of my favorite groups, the Backstreet Boys, with “Show me the meaning of being lonely.” And all of a sudden, on the freeway in my car, the birth of God’s word came for tonight.

Only in a century where there are cars, trains, planes, digital this, beeping that, messenger here, twinkling lights there, phones ringing, radio singers singing, flashing lights, social media, and endless noise and distractions; would God put us to the age-old question in 2020.

What is the meaning of being lonely? What if this is the Christmas gift? To understand that what you are going through is not a test, not a trial, or a judgment, or a punishment.

But what if underneath the most dreadful, awful, tear-filled holiday, there is an amazing gift?

The Backstreet Boys ask, “Show me the meaning of being lonely. Is this the feeling I need to walk with?” As Reverend Kate spoke last Sunday about Mary pondering words, I ask you to ponder this question. Is this the feeling I need to walk with? What have you discovered this year about yourself that is new? What have you learned about your own strength, perseverance, ingenuity, and ability to make it through? What creativity has been born? What phone friends have you discovered? What relationships have you repaired? How has your faith grown? And the list goes on.

The pandemic will be going on for a year soon enough, and although there is the hope of vaccination, I can assure you the world will never be the same. But that is alright. Maybe the gift of this Christmas is simplicity.

If we strip away the paganism of the season, and don't get me wrong I love all the twinkle and jingle, the holly and even snow (snow when it is on a postcard). But when we remove the man-made celebration, we get a lonely couple, one man and one very uncomfortable pregnant woman and a donkey traveling to a very busy city, where even though there is hustle and bustle, a baby is born in the solitude of his parents. A small threesome, and for some period that night, representative of this night, they were alone.

But were they? Were they really? In today's Gospel we get the story of the shepherds. In 2020, we would call that another pod, off by themselves. In reality, a few shepherds may group together at night, but very commonly they spend a great deal of time out with their flock, alone, lonely.

What is the meaning of being lonely? God is with us. God has always been with us, and a part of us always knows God is just a breath away. What is the meaning of being lonely? Maybe, just maybe, the meaning is to realize we are never alone. Maybe it is to realize that in the simplicity, the quietness, the tears, the lonely search for connection – God is there. Hands outstretched. Emmanuel is with us.

In their loneliness, journeying to Bethlehem, the little couple could be guided by God. In their loneliness, watching their flocks, the shepherds could be approached by angels. This Christmas, in our shared loneliness, we can also feel more like one, and closer to THE ONE.

For a child has been born for us,
 a son given to us;
 authority rests upon his shoulders;
 and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Remember that God is, at the very core, very simple. God is love. On this night more than two thousand years ago, a child was born in a place where might, power and greed were worshipped more than God itself. And that culture had entered into a relationship with a God to which they gave attributes that more resembled themselves, than the actual Creator. And so, an innocent babe would take on an ancient culture and model time and time again love and peace, even to the ultimate sacrifice of death.

What is the meaning of being lonely? Is it so we can hear God more clearly? Is it so we can reflect back at our lives and find the spiritual lesson? What if we are called to sit with

our loneliness and sorrow, our anxiousness and worry, so we can learn we are not alone? So we can hear God, just that breath away, so we can feed the faith that is in us somewhere, or we wouldn't be here tonight.

Per the Backstreet Boys, the reason for the loneliness is “something missing in my heart.” Another question to ponder. What can you birth, this eve? What is missing in your heart? Is forgiveness missing? Is self-acceptance missing? Have you just given yourself a chance to breathe and be alright - with not being alright? I assure you, those angels on high are still there and still telling us not to be afraid.

Not to be afraid, not to be afraid. The birth of a savior is here, the light always shines brightest after the long dark night of the soul. Christ is coming any moment, yet, He has always been there.

This will be a different Christmas for a lot of us. We will feel the pangs of loss and loneliness. But we have memories of better times, and hope for a different and maybe even better tomorrow, so don't waste the gift of loneliness. What is under the wrapping?

Let us see, let us open the gift. Take a moment to breathe, peek under the wrapper, slowly, slowly, what is in there? Open the wrapper a bit more, some light is coming through, ahh. The meaning of the loneliness – to better feel the love of God. To learn to better love ourselves. To grow our faith. To stop judging everything. To be simple. And there it is, the reason for being alone, for this little bit of our lives...

To discover the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, and lastly, the Prince of Peace. Amen