

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church
24 December 2017
Christmas Eve, 11:00 p.m. (Luke 2:1-20)

You may not realize it, but every sermon is a love letter.

Yes.

It's true.

Every time I write a sermon I think, "How can I express the love of God to the people I love?"

And so I write a love letter. To God, to you.

And like most love letters, the words do not come easily. But I shall try.

You make me a better person, a better priest. When I came here for my interview I spent a few moments in this holy place. And I thought, there is love here.

I was so certain I should come here, but so unsure what I would find here. In our book, that Book, there are stories that help us through times of uncertainty, of anxiety. Like Mary coming to Bethlehem. So in the Christmas story, I'm remembering what it was like when I first walked into this church. Look at it: the shape of the ceiling, the beams, the four gospel windows up high. Does it look like a barn?

We're here, in a barn, and Jesus is being born—such a dangerous, dangerous event. He so easily might not have made it. What were the chances I would find the perfect parish, as a priest called late in life, who showed up here feeling so vulnerable? God is always there in the improbable moments. Meeting the love of your life. Finding home. And in a manger where a very dangerous birth is happening. Look around this place. You can almost hear the animals breathing and that first cry of baby Jesus.

There has been pain, there have been challenges, but, oh, the love that is here! The holiness I can't quite put my finger on, but it is here.

Thank you for inviting me into your lives, into those most intimate times of birth and death, when we have laughed and cried.

And thank you for being here to experience the holiness of this holy night, for sharing it with me as we listen together for the sound of the donkey, the sheep, the wind blowing through Bethlehem and Mt. Pleasant, the manger, OUR barn...

We share the sounds of wonder here.

When our Deacon pours the water of Baptism into the font and I hear the splashing and look into the eyes of the one who will be baptized I think, "What are we doing here?" The water... hearing it, touching it, sprinkling you with it – my heart is touched by this thing that happens. And you welcome the infant or the adult into our community much as you welcomed us – with delight, with love.

We share moments of deep silence here and you teach me to be still when words are unnecessary, sometimes even useless, and we are quiet for a moment – and then the organ starts up full swell, the choir soars in a moving anthem and then all of you stand up loud and strong to praise God and I don't feel so much a priest as a child full of wonder.

You give me goosebumps. I love you for that.

And when I see how you care for one another – and for those outside our doors – I want to be better. To be a more intentional Christian, to be a more attentive citizen, to be a kinder human being. When I witness your welcome to the strangers, people who come through the front doors we have been waiting forever to meet for the first time, and people who come to the parish hall because there is no room at the Inn that we call our town, our state, our country, our world, I am reminded witnessing the kindness you give them that I, too, can better welcome the stranger as you welcomed me.

You make me feel my heart beating.

I look out from here nearly every Sunday. Wondering how in the world I can express God's love to you, how, on Sunday and through the week, I can express *my* love for you. I bungle it, I mess up – like we all mess up in God's eyes – and you forgive me, usually by laughing. And in the grace of your forgiveness I am compelled to be more forgiving, more understanding and to let my laughter be always kind.

And I look out from here and I see faces I know, sometimes faces that are new to me, and I am so grateful, so very grateful. I see empty places in pews – familiar faces I can no longer see or touch – and I grieve, and grieve deeply, but I am also so full of gratitude that they shared their lives with us. Because each one of them, too, our saints, made me a better person in spite of all my efforts not to be any different than I was on last Thursday, last June, fourteen years ago.

And so, on this Christmas Eve, I write this letter of love to you. Not *because* it is Christmas Eve, but because I wanted to share my thoughts with you. I'm an old man now. How improbable. But because of you, I also feel new. It was so against all odds I should end up here, that all of you should end up here, that all of us should so miraculously be together tonight no matter how long you've been coming here or even if you just wandered in tonight because, well, it's Christmas—you are a miracle too. We're celebrating holy vulnerability – ours and that of the infant of Bethlehem who will grow into a man who will stand with the poor and call them blessed. The baby in a manger, helpless, who will teach us compassion and wisdom and the truth of God's extravagant love. You, like that man, teach me these things. You have. You do.

In the darkest time of the year, in dark times, we believe that in our vulnerability, our fragility, our mortality, that there is hope, and that hope is eternal, that there is love, and love is enduring.

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In a moment we will take the bread and wine, and we will draw closer to the manger, and to heaven, because Jesus asked us to remember.

May it ever be so.

Amen.