"Encountering the Holy"

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
Christmas Eve, 2017

Holidays such as Christmas are often full of traditions. Here at First Parish, the song you just heard, "Oh Holy Night," has long been a part of our Christmas Eve service. Yet, what does it mean to call this a *holy* night?

In a classic text, religious philosopher Rudolph Otto describes the holy as something entirely other that incites a sense of mystery and wonder, but also fear and terror. For Otto, the Holy evokes an *emotional* response—faced with something different from ourselves, we may feel both the fear of uncertainty *and* the tug of curiosity to know more. In its difference, the holy pulls us into an experience that is beyond our comfortable lives, beyond our certainty, perhaps even a bit beyond our control.

Whatever we may or may not believe about the nature of God, I think we all have experienced this sense of something more, of something other, of something bigger than ourselves. Perhaps we felt it when standing at the edge of an ocean or when bathed in the sounds of a powerful piece of music. Perhaps we felt it when death took away one we love. Or, maybe we felt it when we held a newborn child.

Encountering the holy is an experience that challenges us to be aware of the bigness of life—reminding us that life is always more than we can fully know or understand. While this uncertainty can invoke terror, this unknown landscape is also the place to which our hopes may be tethered and in which our dreams may come true. Encountering the holy is coming face to face with both the promise and the fragility of life.

The Christmas story tells us that on this holy night a child was born who would become a savior. Some expected a king to save them from Roman occupation. And while Jesus would denounce the injustices of the Roman Empire, he also harshly judged the religious leaders who prioritized their own political power over the well-being of those who were hungry, in prison, or sick. Rather, Jesus' life and teachings suggest that his concern was to transform the world into a more just, equitable, and life-sustaining place for all. As savior, he brought hope in a vision of a world governed by love of neighbor and love of God—the holy bigness of this wondrous life.

But on this night, all that was in the future. On this night, Jesus was just a baby. Like all parents, I suspect Mary and Joseph gazed at their infant and wondered . . . what will happen

© *Stephanie May 2017*

to this child? What will his laugh sound like? How will he respond when his heart is broken? What kind of man will he grow up to be? As Sophia Lyon Fahs writes,

> "[parents] sitting beside their children's cribs—
> feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.
> They ask, "Where and how will this new life end?
> Or will it ever end?
> Each night a child is born is a holy night—
> A time for singing,
> A time for wondering,
> A time for worshipping."

Each night a child is born is an encounter with the holy—with the uncertainty of the future holding both promise and peril.

And tonight is the night we pause together to encounter this holy experience of birth, of new life. In the darkness of winter, we gather uncertain about the coming months and years. We may be here tonight with many fears for what this unknown future may hold. And, we may be here tonight holding fast to the possibilities of what could be in our life, in the life of one we love, in our shared lives as neighbors and citizens of this nation and this planet.

Whatever we may bring to this Christmas, we are invited on this night to encounter the holy—to gaze on the face of an infant whose future is unknown, but full of possibility. On this holy night, we celebrate because in the promise of new life we find renewed hope for what is possible. Although we are not certain—for the holy is always bigger than we are—we are lured past our fears and into the possibilities of what life may become.

So may we celebrate.
So may we hope in a more loving and just world.
So may we be grateful for the gift of life.
Amen.

© *Stephanie May 2017*