

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service 2017  
Pastor Kim Engelmann  
West Valley Presbyterian Church

When I was in the Holy Land this past September we went the Church of the Nativity – the place where historians generally do agree that Jesus first came into the world

The church had been built over the original site, and in order to get to the little alcove – it was a little cave in a rock –you had to wait in line.

In fact you had to wait in a very LONG line

The line was a serpentine, winding through the large cathedral of a church, back to the lobby area

There was construction going on in the cathedral so they had rerouted the line through a very narrow place and the crowd was crammed together.

At one point my husband Tim and Doug Gips – two strong men stood like body guards around our little group to keep us from being pushed out of line – losing our spot.

Now, please know that when we arrived there, I was already tired.

There was a record heat wave in the area.

We were low on water.

I was cranky

Yet encouraged by others I waited, grumpy and exhausted, rolling my eyes

It was about a three-hour wait.

As we approached Jesus' birthplace – there were some stairs going down to the alcove.

I was standing on the first step, and someone behind me pushed me forward.

I lurched off the step and stumbled forward into a man with a cane, barely balanced on the edge of the second step

It would have been a disaster, had not someone grabbed me and steadied my balance so I didn't fall forward with greater force.

I was so mad!

Who did these people think they were?

And how could they be so unchristian-like as they waited to see where Jesus was born?

A bunch of hypocrites!

I should have stayed on the bus and prayed on my own!

And then it was my turn.

I knelt beside the little alcove in a rock –Jesus' birthplace

I peered into the tiny area, warmed by the soft glow of candles

And I felt for the first time in a long time, the gentle presence of the living God

The few moments I knelt there, were holy moments – a sacred space...

I was aware that God came to us in Jesus that first Christmas

And loved every minute of it

He enjoyed coming to us in a way we wouldn't reject – at least at first

Who turns away an infant who reaches out their arms?

Who turns away from a baby who smiles at them?

I knelt and tears sprung to my eyes, time melted away

And gratitude flooded through me, that God would want a relationship with the world, that much

As I got to my feet and turned to face the crowd behind me

I realized I had been given a gift – it was a new vision, a new perspective

Because every face straining forward to see this tiny alcove

Every body pushing, posturing themselves to be next in line

Was someone for whom the God of Jesus Christ had great affection

Was someone for whom the infant Christ would have held out his arms and smiled

And how a tiny baby, born to peasants in the ancient world, could cause all this commotion in 2017?

It had to be an act of Almighty God

As was my own new sense of well-being, and deep love for each person as I walked by them on my way out of the church.

This gift of gratitude and well-being did not come because I had tried hard to be a good Christian

This love for people that I had as I passed them had nothing to do with my own efforts...or good intentions

All that stuff pales in comparison to the love of God, that is in Christ Jesus our Lord that comes to us as a complete and total gift – in spite of ourselves

A sacrificial love

A humble love

A powerful love that will go to any length, that will plummet any depth

In that moment as I knelt in the church of the nativity, by that tiny alcove where Jesus came to the world over 2,000 years ago...

Jesus came to me again ...YES...in spite of myself

And filled me with HIS presence...

My eyes were opened, my heart was warmed...and I saw things so differently

It is the difference between seeing things after your eyes become accustomed to the darkness, and seeing things after the light is turned on...

I'd like you all to take out your candles

Take a look at them

They are relatively unimpressive

A pillar of wax with a wick at the top – odd looking things actually

Of themselves they can do nothing

They cannot light up a room, or bring warmth on their own

Candles are useless without the flame

Unable to accomplish anything...

And yet they were created to hold the flame

They were made precisely for that purpose...

In the same way, we were created to hold the flame of God's presence

We cannot be the church, we cannot love one another, we cannot love God unless the Son of God comes to us again this Christmas Eve

And lights our hearts on fire

Fills us with his presence, anoints us with the Holy Spirit

Changes our perspective, lights our way

We were made for this

We were created to hold the flame of his presence – that comes to us from outside our dark world

Just as Jesus came to us, from a kingdom that was not of this world

Yet his life was the light of all people...the scripture tells us...

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it!

As your candle is lit tonight I'd like you to imagine your own heart

Receiving the flame of his presence – being warmed and transformed by that flame –

Ask him for it-

It's what you were created for

Receiving the flame of his presence is our only hope on experiencing how to love God

It is the only way we can ever truly know how to love one another

It is the only way we can begin to see others with God's eyes

And change the world, step by step, to love him back.

He came to us that first Christmas, and he keeps coming – even to a grumpy pastor who knelt by his birthplace angry and worn – and got up moments later in love with the world.

May he come to us all this Christmas Eve and fill our dark hearts with the light of his wonderful presence – the hope of the world.

Let us pray.