

The Reverend Jennifer B. Cleveland
Christmas Eve 2022 / 4pm and 7pm

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

For many years every December, I went to a Christmas concert where I had the great fortune to hear the late Linda Hornbuckle sing. She would come out clapping and with her big, velvety rich voice, she would ask us, “Are you ready?” and then she would ask again, with a big smile, leaning in crowd, “Are you ready?” and maybe one more time, “Are you ready?” And then once she had created expectancy and gotten even the most restrained and recalcitrant folks in the crowd going with a snapping and foot tapping, she would launch into her song.

She was typically the guest artist, so she would come on stage, leave again, come back on stage, leave again. Every time she came back on stage, she would ask the same question. *Are you ready?* She seemed to know that our attention naturally waxes and wanes, so she brought us back, each time, to that place of expectancy, of keen listening, ready to hear the song.

Are you ready? This question comes up a lot at this time of year! If you have been to the store or gone out to run errands at all in the past month and a half, it is highly possible that you have been asked this question: This past week, that question shifted with the weather. You might have wondered if you were going to be able to *finish* getting ready. Or, you might have been ready, but then had to shift gears. I imagine that for some of us here, this week hasn't unfolded in quite the way we expected. Some of you might have expected you'd be elsewhere tonight and some of you might have been planning on having more guests with you. Lots of plans and preparations have been upended. We've readied, readjusted, and re-readied ourselves.

This question—Are you ready?— is at the heart of tonight's gospel, as well. Are we ready to see and hear that story afresh? Whenever I picture the scene, I still tend to start with a Christmas version of *Charlotte's Web*, where, if I look closely enough, I can see the words *radiant child* or *humble baby* woven in a spider's web in the background.

But then, as we move in closer and closer, the question shifts again, going deeper, because even with all of the singing and delivering of a baby and sharing of the good news and the traveling of everyone to Bethlehem—there is a lot of movement going on here—this is a story of a baby being born in less-than-desirable circumstances. Were any of those in this gospel fully ready for how it unfolded? And once the baby was born, did they feel ready for the next day? Even when there are months — sometimes years —of expectant planning and preparation is anyone ever ready when a baby enters their life? They are so small. So completely vulnerable. Is that what Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds imagined that the child Emmanuel, God-with-us would be like? Maybe, but I wonder. Were they ready for how love can instantly unfurl the corners of the heart that have never before been touched before? Were they ready for how they would be stretched in every way?

Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem. The angel giving the news to the shepherds. The shepherds immediately going in search of the child. And the singing. All the singing. What word, what slight movement, what detail captures your attention tonight?

I know of a woman and her family who came to the U.S. a couple of years ago as refugees. She received an invitation to a celebration put on by the local refugee center. There was no special purpose for the celebration other than to gather the refugees together to be together, share stories and a feast. This woman said that when she received her invitation, she went into a tailspin. She didn't know why. She is in her 30's and has a job. Her husband, who had been injured from a bomb, has had surgery and gone through physical therapy and is healthy and working. Her two young children are doing well in school. But when she received the invitation to this event, which was called, "Come and Bloom Again," she spiraled into a depression. She spent a lot of time trying to figure out why it was so devastating to receive this invitation before realizing that over the years, she had told herself that she would survive and provide for her family, but that was it.

She was ready to keep going, to keep facing into each new challenge, but she had told herself not to waste time on her deepest hopes for herself, for her family and for the repair of the world. She realized that she hadn't allowed herself to even imagine that it might be possible to hope and dream. The invitation to bloom created a hint of possibility that she might be able to flourish. She was caught off guard, unprepared. She ended up going to the event and it opened up her imagination and heart in new ways. Ways that she hadn't even realized would ever be possible. She didn't know she was ready. (Story told to me by Tom Robb, who attended the event and had multiple conversations around this experience.) We all have things we hold closely within our hearts that we aren't quite sure God can touch or heal. But that is part of that question of this night: Are we ready to wonder if even in those parts of our hearts that are filled with real fears and real wounds and real unrealized dreams, God is with us and within us and within each other. And all of creation. While the animals are not part of the gospel story, it is important to include them—all creatures of the earth, sea and sky, the flora and fauna, the air and the seas—because God is within all.

That is the essence of this night. That the God who breathed all life, all love, into being, the heartbeat of creation continues to say, "I am ready for you and there is no place where I am not present. No one I am not with." That is what we are asked to soak in tonight.

Are you ready for Christmas? becomes a bigger and bigger and deeper and deeper question. Are you ready to have your sense of reality—of who you are and how the world will always be—re-envisioned by grace? Are we ready to truly take in the news that God—Love incarnate—is truly with each of us in our brokenness and fear? Are we ready to wake up to the dreams of God? Are you ready for a fuller birth of Love-with-us—not only in your own life, but in the lives of *all*? Are we ready for the possibility that God's vision of peace and justice and well-being for all is not just a pie-in-the-sky naive notion, but a deeper reality than the violence in the world? *Are we ready for Christmas?*

It is an earth-shaking, life-changing question. All that we say and do and sing of this night—and there is a lot of singing tonight!— is a stepping into that question.