

Hidden Life

Slide 1-Nativity Scene

Welcome! Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus anew! We acknowledge that God comes down to us and resides with us today. To come to worship is to say 'Yes!' to God's love for us and all creation. Welcome (home)!

Tonight is an occasion for the word to be heard in a new way. The story is the same but our hearing of it has the potential for things that have been hidden from us to come to light. Kathleen Norris knew this truth when she wrote of gathering for Christmas worship. Norris writes,

"We have many defenses against hearing the Christmas readings and taking them to heart. The images are resoundingly familiar—'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light' (of 'the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all')—and the nativity story is so colored by nostalgia that listening takes considerable effort. It's hard for us to remember that, as is always the case with scripture, we are continually invited to hear 'a new song,' words full of possibilities we have not yet seen and can't imagine. All we need are the ears to hear, but our tired old ears resist us at every turn."

How is it that our ears resist us? Is it a matter of motivation? Is it training? Is it distraction?

Slide 2 – Expect Great Things

We won't hear much if we don't expect to hear anything. Can something new be revealed to us when the story is so familiar? In some cases we tune out quickly and are not present when the reading takes place. Or we come to church in order to please someone else but our own hearts are not in it. Or we might come with a heavy heart. And it doesn't matter if we have some control over what we expect or if it is beyond our ability to command our actions, when the expectations are low it is difficult to hear, and the life that is the true life remains hidden from us.

To have the hidden revealed is not to prove that Jesus is the One who came down so that we may have love, light, peace and joy. The revealing is the work of the Holy Spirit. When you believe and trust that Jesus is Lord, you will see with new eyes the truth in the scriptures and the wonders of God's creation. Belief is more like love than logic. What is hidden only to be revealed is shown to us by God's action. It often comes unbidden. It comes spontaneously, unforced, freely, by the grace of God.

Slide 3 – Revealed by the Holy Spirit

Kathleen Norris saw this one morning when she was at St. John's Abbey in Minnesota. She told another resident of the Ecumenical Institute that the monks had begun First Corinthians in case she wanted the opportunity to hear the letter read aloud. Her friend's doctoral thesis had been on a passage from First Corinthians and she was in the process of turning it into a book. She had engaged the text for more than ten years, making a pilgrimage to Corinth, studying the words of Paul in Greek, German and many English translations.

Norris writes, "But on this morning as she listened in the abbey church, something caught her attention that she had never noticed before. It was a revelation that left her gasping for breath, and I believe she left the church that morning amazed, not a little discomfited, and above all grateful to have been granted a new sense of the Bible's power."

What Norris observed and her friend experienced is similar to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described of the revelation of God. "With God dwells joy, and down from God it comes, seizing mind, soul and body; and where this joy has grasped a human being it spreads, it carries away, it bursts through closed doors." Is

it any wonder that when God's word was given to the shepherds in the field and their fears were calmed, that they went quickly to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus? Having seen God in the flesh they went about praising God and telling others all that they had heard and seen.

#### Slide 4 – Altdorfer Nativity

The essential message of Christmas, Emmanuel, God with us, is what we turn to this evening. Who is this God and how is he with us? The One High God, the creator of the universe is the One who is with us. The One who has no beginning and no end is this One. This Eternal One is the one whom humans cannot look upon because the human mind cannot comprehend the spaceless, timeless reality of this One. The One High God has made himself known only partially through nature, history, and the utterances of prophets, psalmists and the like. In many ways this God is hidden to us. How then can God be with us?

In a particular time and place God came to be with us taking on the form of human flesh. This is foolish to some and others will stumble on this revelation. But the gospel writer Luke locates how God is with us by stating it took place when Quirinius was Governor of Syria, in the town of Bethlehem. There a child is born who, beyond the power of anyone to account for, was the One High God made low and helpless. The One who inhabits eternity comes to dwell in earthly time. The One whom none can look upon and live, is delivered in a manger is our Lord. Out of love for humans God becomes human.

The reason for God's love of humankind lies not in the man, woman or child, but only in God himself. God gives meaning to life through Jesus. The joy of God passes through the poverty of the manger, and later, through the torment of the cross; then through the triumph of the resurrection, revealing to the world that no power in heaven or on earth is greater than God's will to heal, restore, reconcile and resurrect.

Sometimes we are not aware that there is more for us to see and know and love and honor. This becomes clear to me every so often as the ancient word of God becomes real in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Things that have been hidden from me are revealed all the time. It is one of the benefits of engaging the scriptures, of participating in worship, and of wondering about God.

#### Slide 5 - Forest

Several years ago I began to hear about the hidden life of trees and a verse from Isaiah came to mind. "For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." (Isaiah 55:12) I wondered, "Will this study of trees reveal that they really can clap their hands?" Is this more than that sound of leaves in the wind?

The questions of the wonders of creation began to be answered. What had been hidden was suddenly revealed. Trees are more than objects for shade, or bearers of fruit, material for building or crowned with beauty and majesty, they are responsive, familial, and worthy of greater respect than I had been giving them. Life that had been hidden from me was being revealed through the study of forests.

The glory and goodness of trees is not in their individual selves but in their association as forests. The many trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores a great deal of water, and generates a great deal of humidity. In this protected environment, trees can live to be very old. To get to this point, the community of trees must remain intact no matter what. Trees in this beautiful system never look out only for themselves, but they cooperate for the good of all. I began to understand that a happy tree is part of a life system where all the plants support each other.

### Slide 6 - Nativity

The response to God's revelation is this: The shepherds and the wise men that travel are drawn to the one born in the manger. The poor, the hurting, the oppressed, the ill, and those in sorrow are drawn to the goodness of the Lord. Those who were called, followed Jesus, sat at his feet, viewed his suffering, and were brought the message of his resurrection were drawn to the Christ.

We are certainly drawn to Christ. Our response is also joy in discovering the wonders of life that reside in God's holy word, in one another and all of creation. This life is a journey where God is ready to reveal that which has been hidden on any given day. And when that occurs, we know the life that really is life, God with us.