

## CHRISTMAS EVE, Dec. 24, 2018, Year C

- *In the joyful spirit of this evening, I offer you a little puzzle. Suppose that I have put a quiz question for each one of you with your worship bulletin. Imagine that it is of a *fill-in-the-blank* kind. And it asks for *just one answer*. So, fill in this blank: "Life is..." How would you fill in the blank, when asked to write *what life is*? I can think of all kinds of potential answers to this puzzle. Among them, that life is an *adventure*, a *challenge*, a *bore*, an *opportunity*. Or, that life is *hard*, *uncertain*, or *happy*. It is easy to imagine how a large group of *very different people* might therefore provide very *different answers* to this puzzle. But, there is a more important possibility. *Can we also imagine how many of us, even all of us, could answer in the same way?* We could all say this ~ that '*life is... a search for meaning and purpose, and abiding love.*'*
- For, in big and in small ways, we *all* search for these things. And *yet*, despite the constancy of this search, *we usually don't find the meaning and purpose that we seek, nor abiding love, solely within ourselves or by ourselves.*
- This is because we *don't discover* abiding love, meaning and purpose, *in most of the places where we look for them*. Now, it's common for us to seek these *significant things* in *relationships*, or in *pursuits* that we initiate, and in our shared *activities*. *And these forms of seeking have value*. But, the fact that *they sometimes let us down*, may be a reason why we are *here* this evening. For, *of all our great feasts, Christmas is the celebration most centered on what it means to be fully human*. And it's all about where we find *true love, meaning and purpose* for our lives. *We think we understand* what it means to be human. But we don't! And it takes the incarnation of the Son of God within human life to show us what it means to be *truly human*. And it is *for this*, that we yearn.
- Christmas has the power to remind us that our search for meaning, purpose and love is *not in vain, even if* our quest –*so far*– has *not* been satisfied. And

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so, we *live in hope*, as we press on seeking something *more*. *Or*, we give up, and *allow* ourselves to be *satisfied with less*! *Celebrating Christmas affirms our quest*, in part by reminding us that people have *always* engaged in this universal search. Like the Wise Men from the east, we are here *because we yearn for more* ~ and for *far more* than daily life seems to offer or teasingly promise.

- Deep and latent within our consciousness are the *traces of an ancient memory* ~ a *lingering* memory of something *not quite* discernible. It is the *memory of an awareness* about our origins and our destiny. And so, we search for something that *transcends* the limits of everything that presently *fails* to satisfy us. *The truth at the heart of Christmas is all about discovering transcendence [here](#), in the midst of all that is worldly* and tangible.
- Our search for true meaning and purpose, and abiding love, points us toward a mysterious and *heavenly* reality. Notice how the original Christmas story involves *angels* and a *leading* star. *Because the mysterious reality we are seeking, has a source that lies beyond our grasp, and beyond our ability to know on our own*. This is why we sometimes *mistakenly* settle for *earthly* substitutes in our search. The Christmas Gospel teaches us that our quest for real value in human life is *only* satisfied by something greater than ourselves. It is only satisfied by *someone –not just some thing– who enters our human experience from beyond its present limits*. And then, *astonishingly, he transforms* the circumstances and limitations of our personal being.
- *Christmas celebrates how, through Jesus' visitation, and by his presence* within us, our Lord joins us. *And, with him, we are changed [from](#) all that is *merely* human, [toward being more than simply](#) human*. He transforms us beyond the limits of what we presently know. And he fulfills the potential

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that our loving God has placed within us. *This is why we are here* this evening, whether we are aware of it or not.

- *St. Francis of Assisi figured this out long ago.* In what we *mistakenly* call the 'dark ages, he perceived *a light-filled truth*. Blessed Francis figured out that every one of us, *educated or uneducated, rich like his father or poor like himself...* that *every one of us needs something significant*. We need not only to *hear The Great Story*, at some point in our lives. We need to *hear The Story over and over again*. And not only hear it, *but also see it*. And when we *hear and see the story again and again*, its truth has great power to overcome our spiritual *deafness and blindness*, and soak into our *dry hearts and minds*. It is to blessed Francis that we owe having nativity scenes in our churches and homes. And it is to Francis that we owe including nativity 'plays' in our liturgy at Christmas. *Christmas is all about how the great thing that we seek has come near, into our midst, available to our experience.*
- In the painting I have included with your worship bulletin, *James Tissot has beautifully captured St. Francis' insight about the nativity scene. Notice how unearthly light radiates outward from the holy child.*<sup>1</sup> At the bidding of angels, lowly shepherds have come looking for him. *What joy warms their hearts in this fulfillment of their search ~ the same fulfillment we can find for our unceasing search.* For their joy can be ours, as we reflect on *why* we have come, and on *what we hope for* by our celebration of Jesus' birth.
- *The Great One who was, and is, and is to come, is here!* He is here in love because he will *always* be with us. He is with us this evening, honoring our good intentions. And he will be with us tomorrow, fulfilling our joy. He will be with us in all the days ahead, not only in moments of joy, but also in in moments of need and even in occasions of challenge or sorrow.

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- As the Gospel promises, *we find the fulfillment of our **abiding** human desire for **true meaning and purpose, and lasting love, here, in the Nativity.** We discover it in God's self-revealing and manifestation of **the Spirit's presence.** And, *paradoxically,* we find **God's presence** in the most vulnerable form of **human presence** ~ in a baby born in the filth of a stable, where animals are brought in from the harsh and inhospitable winter fields around us.*
- And so, our Christmas discovery begins when we acknowledge that we *yearn for more than* what we apprehend every day. In the face of Jesus, *we meet the fulfillment of our yearning.* For in him we find **abiding love, true meaning and purpose.**



James Tissot, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*

### **Luke 2:1-20**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Many if not most of James Tissot's images can be accessed by going to the website of the Brooklyn Museum, which has a comprehensive collection of Tissot's biblical artwork, and much of which is accessible online. Got to: <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/tags/Tissot>