

The Eve of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ (B)
Luke 2:1-21

Middle Collegiate Church sits at the corner of 112nd Avenue between 6th and 7th Streets in Manhattan's East Village. Squeezed between bodegas and now-gentrified apartment buildings, its neo-Gothic spires and Tiffany windows have soared into New York's skyline for 128 years. That all came to an explosive end in the wee hours of the morning on Saturday, December 5, when a fire tore through a hallowed-out apartment building next to the church quickly engulfed the church itself.¹

Firefighters spent hours battling the blaze as neighbors watched in horror, mouths agape. After 5 hours, 6 alarms, 4 injured firefighters, too many fire trucks to count, and a cascade of tears all that remained was the church's frame, battered, bruised, and smoldering from the heat of the embers. Gone was the glorious structure that had held in its bosom the tears of loved ones as they said their final goodbyes to their beloveds at funerals. Gone was the sanctuary that had once radiated with the smiles of parents and godparents as the communion of saints—both alive and dead—welcomed children and teenagers and adults into the household of God through baptism. Gone were the wooden walls and cushioned pews that had reverberated with the congregation's hallelujahs and amens as choirs of angels sang of glory and triumph in the midst of life's storms. And gone were the cinder blocks walls of the kitchen that had ladled out hot meals to the hungry and encased the listening ears of pastors as they held the dreams and the confessions of thousands upon thousands of people yearning to know they were forgiven, they were loved; they still had a life worth living. All of it—gone.

One thing, however, remained. Hanging on the perimeter of the church's exterior and flapping in the wind flies a banner proclaiming the heart of the church: **Just Love.**²

¹ Jonathan Hilburg, "Manhattan's 128 -year-old Middle Collegiate Church destroyed by Fire", *The Architect's Newspaper* December 8, 2020, <https://www.archpaper.com/2020/12/manhattan-128-year-old-middle-collegiate-church-destroyed-by-fire/>, accessed December 10, 2020; Maia Cramer and Edgar Sandoval, "East Village Fire Damages 128-Year-Old Church," *New York Times*, December 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/05/nyregion/church-fire-nyc.html>, accessed December 10, 2020

² Amy Lunde-Whitler, Twitter post, December 5, 2020, 12:05 p.m., <https://twitter.com/alundewhitler/status/1335269048234500100>.

How can it be that heat from a raging fire and pressurized water from firefighters' hoses could decimate brick and stone, glass and velvet, gold and silver, but could not—*did not*—even singe a corner of a lightweight—and by all accounts flimsy—piece of plastic?

Yet there it stands getting the last word, a glorious contradiction if there ever were one: Just. Love.

I'm sure science could come up with a hypothesis.

I am sure reason could deduce a theory.

Still, it defies all the laws of nature.

"How can this be?"

You know, that's the same question Mary asked herself as the baby Jesus grew inside her womb.

"How can this be that the one who set the earth in motion with a just a touch of breath—*ruah*—would choose me—a young woman with no pedigree, no connections, no spouse, no authority, and no story worth remembering to bear the One who will save the world from its darkest shadows, its deepest demons, its longest nights?"

Everyone, you see, expected the Savior of Israel to come from royalty, or at least someone with name recognition, someone who wouldn't be such a source of gossip because of her marital status or lack thereof. This happening to Mary, to *Mary*, defies reason. It doesn't make sense. It's a glorious contradiction if there ever were one.

"How can this be?" she wondered.

For God, it was the only way to be.

Nine months later, perhaps on a night like this one, as Mary nursed her newborn at her chest a small group of men on the edge of the valley stood in disbelief repeating Mary's refrain: "How can this be?" How can this be that in the monotony of tending to the most clueless of animals—and on the graveyard shift no less—that the glory of angels would attend to them first with the news that the world's story was being born

anew? How can this be that while they were minding their own business scarcely thinking about God, God was thinking of them, inviting them to see and to hold God's very self in human form in their arms?

Such a privilege should have first been given to the so-called more respectable folks, the ones who tithed every week, the ones with connections and means, the ones who had "made it." This happening to them, *to them*, defies reason. It doesn't make sense. It's a glorious contradiction if there ever were one.

"How can this be?" they wondered in fear and awe.

For God, it was the only way to be.

This is how Love wins. Against common sense. In defiance of reason. Amidst contradiction. In the tears of an exhausted mother, the fretfulness of an anxious papa, the quotidian duties of a group of night-shift shepherds, the trajectory of creation's destiny is forever changed. Where might and connections and material gain spelled success and purpose, humility now charts the course. And where failure and sin and pride and death once spelled the end of our story, our future, our hope, Love—all-consuming, death-defying, second and third and fourth and millionth chance-giving Love becomes our oxygen. In coming to earth in human form God makes clear what God is about: not judgement, not blame, not rules, not power, not might: Just. Love.

But you may be wondering: "how can this be?" How can we trust that God still loves us when we aren't sure that we love God?

How can God pay attention to the mundane of our lives when we scarcely have the time or energy or will to pay attention to God?

How can God come to us and be for us when we tend to this world with such impatience and cynicism?

Such love,
such tenderness,
such belovedness
defies reason.
It doesn't make sense.
It's a glorious contradiction if there ever were one.

Yes, we are called
to repentance—
to change—
to expanded hearts—
to generosity.

But preceding that, coming after that is the heart of God, a heart that can withstand the flames of fire, the sting of death, and the uncertainty of tomorrow. That's what makes tonight so holy. In Jesus, God has snuck into the people and places and situations that the world ignores—including our own fragile places—and has given them new life and meaning even when all is dark.

So, don't give up.

For in the fisted cry of a baby boy you will how this can be, why this can be:

Just. Love.

And it's all for you.

The Rev. Dr. Maria A. Kane
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waldorf, MD
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