

Since my two weeks in Los Padres National Forest last summer, I've been itching for rain – and CA is having it. Other places too. My hope is our forests are drink it up. However wet we might get, it's worth the inconvenience.

Inconvenience is part and parcel to Christmas. A holy Child descends on us, we pray, though we're not always mindful we're praying to be inconvenienced by Love. Tonight's news of great joy, however, changes how, where, and to whom we expect Love to come.

We'll be singing *I am so glad each Christmas Eve, the night of Jesus' birth, when like the sun a star shone forth, and angels sang on earth.*

Do we trust this earth-bound Love when life rains on my parade? Do we trust we're incredibly love even when we don't get what's on our wish list; or when we hurt more than have visions of sugar plums in our heads?

How about when wars don't cease; or when today's little town of Bethlehem still faces injustice, when friends in Ethiopia and elsewhere are at risk? How well do we trust earth-bound holy love when we grieve deeply for loved ones, and when our global family hurts? The hurts and fears of all the world belong to us all as one family in God.

Christmas is the announcement that Love breaks in where chips are down. And if this news hasn't inconvenienced us yet, give it time. It will if we let ourselves see the world through the lens of Christmas. God indeed shows up on earth, and sometimes also through us.

The hope of gathering for worship at Christmas – whether in-person or on Zoom – is to call each other to not let Christmas just become another *happy holiday*. Then it's not really Christmas at all – which scripture says embodies the zeal of the Lord of hosts – as we heard Fred read tonight.

Our Isaiah 9 text proclaims,

People who walked in darkness have seen a great light. On them light has shined, increasing their joy, for a child has been born for us. And authority rests on this one named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace whose peace is upheld by justice and righteousness. The reading ends, *The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Will do what? And how? The word “zeal” in Hebrew is *qin’a*. Zeal meant to inspire our *qin’a* – our *zeal* to live as though we believe a great light has shown; joy has increased through this child given for us. The question is, how do we let **this** have authority in our lives?

We’ll sing, *I am so glad each Christmas Eve, that a star shown forth and angels sang on earth.* But to give **this** authority means letting it shape our choices, our agendas, our generosity, our zeal.

Will the Christmas story have authority after we take our trees down, when a diagnosis isn’t good, when grief comes to our home, when prayers seem unanswered? Will we even want God’s *zeal* for our weary world when it intends to inspire us to be about this same zeal?

With it clear – the coronavirus is hanging out – I’ve been drawn more than ever to the Christmas story. We have a God who joins us in the thick of things. God-with-us as Light that keeps shining, as Joy that transcends sorrow, as Zeal that empowers us to creatively join in.

I’ve been moved by stories of zeal – like the story about Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was at Christmas in 1956 that Harper Lee received a creatively generous gift. Lee was a struggling writer: working as an airline ticket agent to make enough to stay home and write on weekends. It’s hard to successfully write that way.

Friends of hers saw what was happening and believed in her talent. With a lot of zeal, they told her to look under her tree for a present. She found an envelope inscribed: “You have a year off from your job to write. Merry Christmas!” Lee thought it was a joke, but it wasn’t.

Her friends were inspired by her talent and invested to support her. The result was *To Kill a Mockingbird* — which has sold millions of copies, become a film and a play, and is widely known for inspiring efforts toward justice. I see those friends' zeal as an overflow of God who makes such *zeal* possible.

One more story. Anyone buy this jam/jelly with red checkered tops? I started buying it at the start of the pandemic, and when it finally ends and we can cook for each other again, I'm going to roast enough candied walnuts to fill the jars and gift them away. Why this brand?

Some of you know I serve on our ELCA's Consultative Panel for Lutheran/Jewish Relations. I've learned through attention to this that people behind this French brand were among those who sheltered Jews in their homes at great risk during the Holocaust. Signs on their streets warned that to sheltering Jews brought a death sentence.

But this family sheltered them anyway with a zeal made possible by our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. I hope it's not too long before I can gift away these jars with candied walnuts.

Dear friends, may we each find ways to creatively live Christmas as an empowered way of life. *The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

God will bring Light that keeps shining, Joy that soothes sorrow, Hope brought about by zeal. Christmas is not just a *happy holiday* but is God's light, joy, and hope enacted *on earth*.

Merry Christmas and a zeal-full new year to all.

Amen

+Pastor Peg Schultz-Akerson, LCM, Los Angeles
May we live the zeal of Christmas today and always!