

Christmas Eve
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
December 24, 2021

About three weeks ago, I was walking around, and I noticed I was a little antsy. Who knows what it was? General holiday business? Omicron headlines heralding doom? Excitement about Christmas, family, and a little vacation coming up? Whatever was happening to me, I walked around not feeling particularly centered. So, after about four hours of ignoring this feeling, I decided to spend some time in prayer and meditation to get my head back on straight.

I searched on my phone to find a meditation that would help settle me and let me find my center. Sure enough, the almighty internet did not disappoint. I found a lovely twelve-minute meditation that promised to do the trick and still my mind.

I closed my eyes, sat in a comfortable chair and pushed play. The voice of a teacher came on and instructed me to pay attention to my breathing and to pay attention to how my body felt on the chair. I fidgeted a bit with boredom. I thought about grocery lists and work tasks. I thought about COVID protocols and how sick I am of wearing a mask. I thought about a million little things that needed attention. And just when I was at my most frenetic, the soothing voice from the meditation said something I had never heard before. It said: Breathe in the joy of being alive, and remember: your life is a miracle.

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That phrase hit me like lightning – bright and surprising, and a little bit scary. Every shred of my tiredness evaporated before the miracle of being fully alive in that moment. Could that be true? With all the difficulties that come with life, could life really be a miracle? I read the news every day, sometimes twice, and life seems like struggle. But my meditation was trying to teach me that at its core, life is miraculous. And, my faithful friends, it is exactly that miracle that our God chose to experience in the manger on Christmas morning.

In the history of gods and goddesses across all the earth, none but one has decided to be born, to be fully human, to be fully alive. Most of the gods of the world have lived on mountains or in fire or in the depths of the sea – far away from the messiness of the human experience. But not the God we worship tonight. Our God approached Mary, looking to be born, to experience all that it means to live.

Because everyone here knows that life is not all sunshine and rainbows. There are sick kids in the middle of the night, estranged families, greed, poverty, cruelty, and worse. There are moments when the weight of entering into the third year of this pandemic seems like a weight that is too heavy to bear.

And this struggle is life? This mess is the miracle in which God wanted to participate? Yes, says Mary. Yes, say the shepherds, watching their flocks by night and bowing down in awe.

It would be easy to focus on the superhuman nature of the Nativity – the star in the sky and the arrival of the angels. But the miracle is instead so very human. A regular child – the tears and smiles and skinned knees – that miracle of flesh is our God. And because God chose to be born as a human, neither earth nor heaven will ever be the same. This birth brings heaven down to earth and earth up to heaven. This birth is a bridge between us and God. When you kneel and pray to God, you are praying to a God who knows what it is like to bend a knee, to feel a heartbeat, to breathe.

Just think, by breathing in and breathing out tonight, you are sharing in the same miracle as our God. You are living in a holy incarnation that becomes clear on a night like this one. Don't waste this miracle, this gift, if you can at all help it.

Breathe in the hurts of the world and breathe out mercy. Breathe in the wrongs of the world and breathe out justice. Breathe in the frustrations of the world and breathe out joy.

In his Christmas letter to the diocese, our bishop Jeffrey Lee gave his take on the miracle of Jesus coming into the world this way:

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it!

I ask you to join me in making this proclamation our way of life. Let us make it real. The darkness of the world is our opportunity to shine brighter than ever. Every act of hope and love, every decision to care for one another, every kindness and act of generosity, every work of justice, every prayer of thanksgiving — they are all proclamations of the truth at the heart of the Christian life:

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it!

My friends, attend to the holy babe, born on Christmas night – surrounded by His friends and family. Notice that his chest rises and falls with very human breath. And this is a miracle because this is God. And no less miraculous is the air that you breathe in and out.

Breathe in the joy of being alive, because your life is a miracle.

Merry Christmas. Amen.