

“You Are Mine”

Sermon by Pr. Renata Eustis

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Christmas Eve

This is my 18th Christmas Eve homily in this place. The story is the same old, old story. Sometimes people ask me if I could just use one of my old homilies. Other people say it's important to just focus on the actual Christmas story because how could I ever say anything that could be better than that.

Most of you know this story as well as I do. We relate to this story in different ways—and always through the prism of our lives. This story is for me the primary story that shapes my life and how I see the world. The question I bring to it, is not whether or not it is true. The question I bring is what is the Truth that is there. What is the meaning for us this year? What is the meaning for us—tonight?

And when it comes right down to it—as much as I try to find the meaning for others--I can only honestly share what the meaning is for me.

Those of you who have heard me preach on Christmas Eve, know that God's activity in this world, in all the spheres of our lives is really important to me. I know God cares about justice and mercy *in this world*—and I feel the fragility of our planet and the brokenness of our country. I feel the anxiety all around us and I know Jesus is the Prince of Peace and the Savior of the World. I know that the birth of Jesus speaks Hope into all of the world's pain and brokenness.

But tonight I feel compelled to go to a different place—to the very personal level—to the deepest places of our hearts and souls. We are each made in God's image, so I know there is deep goodness and love in each of us. In some people it is buried in so much other stuff that it's hard to see—but I still believe it is there.

But in each of us there is also a deep and usually, secret, place where shame and self-hatred have a foothold. Sometimes they have more than a foothold—sometimes they rule the roost. It's the place where meanness comes from. But even if we're people who can keep it in check, there are still all those voices that tell us we're not good enough—we're not worthy—if anyone ever saw us as we really are.

I want to do my best to talk about what the birth of Jesus has to say to each of us—in *this* place.

That God fully entered into human life in Jesus is mind-blowing in terms of how we think about God. But it can also change how we think about ourselves. God becoming human somehow changes the equation. It makes it plain how totally valuable we are—and how thoroughly known we are.

In this very familiar Christmas story, everyone, including Joseph and Mary is going to get registered. They are going to put their names on a list—not so they can get their kids in school or get social security. They're putting their names on the list so they can get taxed—this is their W-4 form. The Roman officials who want these names could care less about the people or the stories behind these names. They're just interested in what they can get *from* them.

When someone knows your name, it's like an expression of value—you were worth remembering. I think about the description of the bar Cheers, as the place where everyone knows your name.

My oldest daughter is working in a big news organization. She manages the anchor schedule, so she sends emails that go to literally 100s of people. Hundreds of people know her name but they have no clue who she is or what she looks like. She's seen any number of them in person—she knows who they are because they are famous and important—and it's her job to know. But they walk right by her, often not looking up or speaking to her. To them, she's young and invisible—unimportant. They don't know the actual value she has in terms of how her work affects their day to day lives.

To one degree or another, it seems like we're living in a time when a lot of people know our names—especially if you're someone who is active on social media. But how many people really know us? And, in this highly image conscious time, how many people do we *want to really* know us? Even in crises, we guard ourselves and our loved ones—so afraid of judgment and misunderstanding.

In our most broken moments—in our most shame-filled places—what we most need is to be known and loved. But instead we hide.

I understand that hiding—that secrecy—because it is hard to be there with people in their pain—or the rage that comes out of that pain. And, people with loving intentions will most assuredly disappoint us in the way they respond to our pain. *We are all just so imperfect.*

Which is the reason why we need God so desperately. God is the one who is *always* coming toward us—but especially in our moments of deep pain and shame. The Gospel—which is so hard to adequately put into words—is that God chooses us. God chooses to be as close to us as possible. God chooses to be born as a baby.

It's hard to believe—it's hard to believe such good news.

I was on a subway in New York—it was the end of the line—and everyone who got on with me was just going one stop. There was a family and soon after the train started moving, one little boy began crying. His cries were somewhere between wailing and screaming. He kept saying, in between sobs, “I don't want to leave the buses. I want to stay.”

Clearly, that was impossible. His wailing was excruciating to listen to, and one man got up and moved farther away.

But I stayed—and got to see the most amazing thing. The boy's mother moved in close. She got right up to his face, and she held it in her two hands. In the midst of his anguished screaming, she spoke his name and she tenderly kissed him on the cheek. And he became quiet.

That's what God is doing for each of us tonight in the birth of Jesus. God is moving in close—as close as it is possible to be. God is right up next to us. In the midst of our anguished screaming—in the midst of the pain and shame that makes people want to move away from us—or that makes us want to move away from ourselves—God moves in close—claiming us—saying you're mine—and I love you—in this place where you cannot love yourself.

In just a minute, we'll hear Josh sing a hymn written by David Haas—who knows something about this place where you cannot love yourself. He told the story on a retreat of writing it—it's by far his most beloved work. David was in a place of deep despair—his pain was so deep he was thinking about suicide. He sat down at the piano and composed the entire thing in 8 minutes. It just flowed out of him—or through him.

We'll take a just a brief moment of silence. And then I invite you to open your hearts and hear these words that are based on Isaiah 43. I invite you—on this night when God comes so close—to hear them as God speaking them to you.