Wonder, hope and love
A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Isaiah 52.7-10; Luke. 2.1-20

A tiny newborn baby was placed in my arms a day or so ago. The enormity of the feelings that this fragile life touched in me lifted my heart and soul. These were feelings of wonder, hope and love. The same feelings greet us this Christmas Day as we come to look on the face of God, revealed to us in a little child. Today is a meeting place. Today, in the Christ Child, God calls us to come and meet him in wonder, hope and love.

Every time we come to this moment of the year, as we come to the end of our Advent journey of waiting and preparation, our experience of Christmas deepens, as we are drawn a little further into the mystery and simplicity of the nativity story. The simplicity of a tiny baby born in poverty and obscurity, the mystery that he is ‘God with us’, bringing a message of peace and salvation for the whole world.

So that we might see, what those others saw, gathered in the stable that night, we are called to come in Wonder.

Our journey of Advent has been to see the revelation of God in the experience of exile. Today is all about revelation. Jesus saw that it was children who were most open to that revelation. They were the ones he said that the ‘kingdom of God’ belonged to. God reveals things to the child in us.

I don’t know how you connect to the child in you that is open to wonder? I know someone who enjoys re-reading the Chronicles of Narnia, to re-live the adventure and connect to the excitement of those stories that she read as a child. Many here will know the wonder of that defining moment in the first of those books - the thrill of Lucy going through the wardrobe - the feel of the fur coats in her fingers, and then the snow - crisp underfoot, those moments when two worlds collided, and Lucy finds herself in Narnia.

As C. S. Lewis so famously wrote1; (Stephanie is going to read about this moment of wonder for us)

"This must be a simply enormous wardrobe!" thought Lucy, going still further in and pushing the soft folds of the fur coats aside to make room for her. Then she noticed that there was something crunching under her feet. "I wonder is that more mothballs?" she thought, stooping down to feel it with her hand. But instead of feeling the hard, smooth wood of the floor of the wardrobe, she felt something soft and powdery and extremely cold. "This is very queer," she said, and went on a step or two further. Next moment she found that what was rubbing against her face and hands was no longer soft fur but something hard and rough and even prickly. "Why, it is just like branches of trees!" exclaimed Lucy. And then she saw that there was a light ahead of her; not a few inches away where the back of the wardrobe ought to have been, but a long way off. Something cold and soft was falling on her. A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night-time with snow under her feet and snowflakes falling through the air.

Today is that kind of defining moment of wonder, where we celebrate one world touching another. The moment when heaven comes down to earth. When God becomes flesh and breaks into human history, and in this child, comes to live alongside us.

1 The Chronicles of Narnia (1950–1956)
In order to wonder at the infinite mystery of God, who willingly confined himself to human form, we need to look with a natural child-like simplicity at these colliding worlds – heaven and earth, revealed in a baby, and like Lucy believe in this new life.

Like Lucy’s moment, this too is an experience to be felt and touched, as we sense the warmth of the hay, hear the breath and snuffles of a tiny baby. See his glory reflected on the faces of the ordinary people gathered around him. And take a leap of faith ourselves and open our hearts to believe, that here in this baby, is revealed to us too, the glory of God.

We are called to come in Hope.

As we look back on this last year, for many of us our sense of hope and security in the future may have been knocked. Throughout our world there are many situations where peace and stability seem so far away and so much in need of God’s light. We remember this Christmas especially Syria and South Sudan. Some people will be faced with a greater sense of uncertainty about their jobs. In London alone over 40,000 people relied on a food bank this year and the level of those living in poverty in this country, according to the recent Rowntree Foundation report, is about a fifth of the population. In our personal and family lives some may have experienced losses or difficulties that have turned upside down the things that gave us hope and stability.

The message today, of God coming to refugees in an out of the way place, as a child, and made known by outcasts, is that the hope of God is in those places, the places where people think they are forgotten and in all places of conflict and need in our world, and his hope is also with us, in whatever we are facing in our lives.

We come today and place all our trust in Jesus, who is the deepest source of hope for our world. Who is God with us, come to offer us a whole new life, not by force or coercion, nor by posturing on the international stage, but as one who comes in the seemingly hopeless state of a baby. By doing so he shares in everything that makes us human – our fragility and weakness and vulnerability, and our need for love - as we struggle to reconcile the confusing world in which we find ourselves. Perhaps in this time of greater uncertainty, we may find ourselves drawing deeper on the hope and life that he offers to us.

Jesus shows us where true power lies, in a reversal of values so radical that we still struggle to grasp the significance. Not in wealth, or status or power or control, or any human structures. Real meaning and hope lie in the strength and endless life that flows from the humility and love of Christ. If we truly place all our trust and hope in him then we will be able to recognise ‘the dark manger corner’ as the centre of the universe. And what happens there as a promise of hope, for all of humanity, and for each one of us.

In order to receive this gift of hope that God offers to us we need to come with Love.

...which means coming as we are. We are not required to be anything other than we are, because Christ comes to us fully as he is. All we are asked to do is to partake in this relationship of love that he offers and receive this gift of himself.

God unwraps himself in his present of himself to us, lays himself open before us in humility, in a stable. Shows his need for us, that he is dependant upon our loving him back, for his work of Love to be accomplished.

Today, we are called to come and receive that precious gift of his love, and his life, and unwrap our hearts and lives to receive him. And so share in the deep hope and the message of peace that he brings to the world.

The shepherds who came in wonder, found love, and shared the hope they had in what had been
made known to them. We are each commissioned to share the hope we have about what we know of God and what has been revealed to us. As we do it, we are with our brothers and sisters around the world who love God and speak of God. It may often feel like what you share is done in an out of the way place, to seemingly insignificant people, on the dark windy hillsides of your life. But that’s where you will be caught up in the glory of God’s Love and become a revelation of that love yourself.

Receive the gift of Christ this Christmas as a child in wonder, at the stable door, with hope and love. Be filled with confidence to make known all you have heard and seen, and all that has been made know to you, of the revelation of that love come among us, bringing wonder hope and love for the world.