

Christmas Eve 2016

So, this happened yesterday:

I was sitting in a doctor's waiting room,
reading a People magazine from August,
surrounded by other folks in various states of boredom or anxiety, as people *are* in
doctor's waiting rooms.

And in walks this man, I'm going to guess he was around 80 years old,
and he's wearing a Santa hat.

I mean, it's two days before Christmas, so that's not that strange.

But then, this elderly gentleman goes and stands in the middle of the waiting room,
gets this huge grin on his face,
starts moving a little, and begins to sing:

"you better watch out, you better not cry...."

All the boredom and anxiety of a doctor's waiting room disappears; everyone starts
laughing, they can't help themselves.

And then the man stops singing,

but he doesn't stop smiling -- we're all smiling now --

and he says "do any of you know where heaven is?"

And who knows where he's going with this, right?

And then he looks right at me and he says

"Heaven is right here.

This is glory, in this room."

And I have to tell you,

in that moment, it felt like it really was.

Something holy.

And then the door opened and a nurse called "Alida Ward?"

and the moment was over.

But not really over -- because it lifted me all day. Still does.

Did you ever have a moment where it felt like something magical just happened,
where it felt like maybe an angel just touched earth?

Felt like that for me in the waiting room.

On the Appalachia service trip we call those "God moments",

unexpected moments when the presence of God is so obvious that all you can do is say "oh my," and "thank you."

Like the boy in our group who told me that the West Virginia grandma whose home he'd fixed had hugged him and called him her special angel.

He'd burst into tears.

"No one's ever called me an angel before," he told me.

He felt God's presence then, in his *God moment*.

God moments happen -- believe me, all the time they happen -- because we worship a God who, well, just likes to hang out with us.

And the biggest proof of that? -- the biggest proof is the story we celebrate tonight.

What if, the story says, what if one day long long ago God decided that the best way to be God was to be one of us.

What if, to do this, God asked a favor of a brave young woman named Mary living in Nowheresville, Judea.

What if that young woman ended up giving birth in one of the crummiest places possible;

And what if God decided that the best way to spread the word was not to the local priests and religious folks

but to a bunch of bored shepherds in the fields who about keeled over when God's angels showed up.

What if all that is really really true?

The question David asked.

First off, what would it tell you about God?

Well, first thing it would tell you that our God is a God who likes surprises, likes sneaking in in the least-likely spot, startling everyone with the unexpected God-moment.

It would tell you that our God is a God with a special fondness for the least-noticed folks,

for the people on the outside and the outskirts --
a nobody girl,
and no-name shepherds.

It would tell you that our God is a God who's willing to turn up anywhere, and does;
that our God is as willing to meet us in the *unlikely* places as the likely --
maybe even more so.

And does that make any difference?
What difference does that make?

All the difference in the world. All the difference in the world.
It means that there is no place we go that God doesn't go with us;
nothing we experience of this life that God doesn't know too;
no laughter that isn't God's laughter,
no tears that are not God's.
It means we are never, ever alone.

And it means that there is nobody in this world that God doesn't care about;
Jesus was born homeless, the Holy family became refugees ...
God's heart is always with the ones who find themselves on the outside,
from the person without a home
to the child without a clique,
to anyone who feels alone.
God's heart is there.
God with us, Immanuel, was born there.

Wherever we go, God has already been;
whatever corner we turn, God is there waiting.
Because *this* -- this mixed up and beautiful world -- this is where God was born.

[At the 11:00 service tonight, there will be][There is] one particular man back in the
bass section,
who, up until a decade ago was our 7th grade teacher,
a post he held for many, many years.

Art McCain is the reason that, ten years later,
my son can still recite the Books of the New Testament better than I can.
Along with recitation, Art told the kids a lot of stories.
One in particular he still loves to tell.
The story goes like this.
There was a little girl who was having a hard time getting to sleep.
She called for her mom,
and her mom came in and hugged her, told her to go to sleep, and tiptoed back out.
A few minutes the girl called for her mom again,
and her mom came in and hugged her and told her everything was all right, go back to
sleep.
And it happened again -- and again -- until finally the weary mom said "sweetie, you
don't need to keep calling *me*;
remember, **God** is right here beside you."
To which, as Art tells it, the little girl replied
"But I want someone with **skin** on."

That's what we celebrate at Christmas: a God with skin on.
A God who turned up in this place *with* us -- surprise!
And that, that makes all the difference.

There is profound truth and meaning in every major religion in the world;
there are many ways to God, and many paths up the mountaintop.
But the magic, the wonder, at the heart of *this* faith,
this Christmas-Christian faith,
is this amazing thing called **incarnation** --
this pretty awesome idea:
what if God was one of us?
How great would that be?

What if it's true? we're asking you.
Here's the best thing: It is.
This story -- it's true.
And it makes all the difference in the world.

Merry Christmas!
Amen.