

CHRISTMAS EVE, 5 PM, DECEMBER 24, 2021 YEAR C

Have any of you ever made sour dough bread? If you have, you know in order to make sour dough bread you need starter dough. And what is starter dough? Starter dough is flour and water that is left out for a few days until it bubbles and produces the yeast you need. Did you know that sour dough has existed almost from when humankind began to make bread? We know it existed in Egypt in 3700 BC and has continued its popularity to today. In fact, at the onset of the pandemic more people decided to bake at home which caused a shortage of yeast in the stores so sour dough bread experienced a new revival in many people's homes.

Now the interesting piece about sourdough starter is that you need to feed it. That means adding a little bit of flour and water over the next several days to the starter until it is bubbly. Once it reaches this bubbly stage, the starter is ready to be used to make bread. You have to literally nurture the starter until it's ready. Then you remove a cup of the starter dough to make your bread but continue to feed and nurture the starter dough so you can make more bread. If you don't feed it, the dough will be kaput and of no use or value anymore. For early settlers, like the miners during the gold rush days, keeping the starter alive was essential so bread could be continually made to keep everyone fed.

It's an involved process. Some families have been making sourdough bread for generations still making bread from the original starter. There have been people who are so obsessed with their sourdough starter and keeping it alive that they will even travel with it. Needless to say the TSA has some interesting stories to tell about sour dough starter going through the Xray machines.

When some of these sourdough enthusiasts have been asked why they would go through all this trouble one person responded by saying, "My great grandmother started this dough, which was handed down to my grandmother which was handed down to my mother which has now been handed down to me. This starter dough is over 100 years old. It is tradition. I have got to make bread and give it away. It is part of my family and my identity and who I am. You know it's really a gift of love. A gift I want to give to others because it's a part of me and a way I can express my love. That is why I do it.

Well, today is Christmas Eve and why in the world am I talking to you about making sour dough bread. Tonight, we celebrate God coming among us as a human being. We celebrate the beginning of Jesus' life, and we celebrate a story that has been passed down from generation to generation for over 2000 years.

This story has been handled and nurtured and carried by millions of people all over the world for centuries. It is now in our possession. And it is up to us to keep the story alive, to nurture it, to keep it growing and to let people know about the experience of a loving God. We add our own experiences of our loving God that was handed down to us because if we don't, the story will die. And you know something, when you're here in church on a night like this where everything is so beautiful and majestic and your heart fills to overflowing, it's not difficult to keep the story alive.

But when we walk out those church doors it becomes a different story. It's so easy to forget why God came into the world in human form when we're confronted with the stresses of everyday life. It's easy to forget when we're seduced by all the hype that tells us what we need to be happy and fulfilled. It's easy to forget when there is a pandemic that keeps us all on edge and weary. It's easy to forget when there are actions of hate

and anger at every turn we take. It's easy to forget when the world seems so much greater and overpowering than our small nugget of faith. But we need to take that story with us. Just like people who take their sourdough bread starter with them everywhere they go, we need to live and breathe this story every day in whatever we do. We need to pack that story in our purses, our iPads, pockets, phones, computers so it is with us every day so we can feed it. We need to remember this Christmas story gives us hope and courage and the ability to wear our faith on our sleeves.

And the story we take with us is really quite simple. God comes to be with us. God comes simply to be present with us, not to take sides, or to blame or shame. God comes offering grace, seeking truth, honoring pain and nurturing healing. Full of grace and peace, God comes. And God often comes at unexpected times and in unexpected places to bring God's reconciling love to us which keeps us on our toes to look for it.

I know we're all familiar with Charles Dickens novel "A Christmas Carol" which is a story about a man who is greedy and uncaring who is visited by several spirits to help him recognize the fruitless path he is on. In the end he is converted from selfishness to selflessness. All of Dickens novels have a Christian theme because Dickens felt a responsibility "to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master, and to lead the reader up to those teachings as the great source of moral goodness. All my strongest illustrations are derived from the New Testament; all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit; all my good people are humble, charitable, faithful, and forgiving. Over and over again, I claim them in express words as disciples of the Founder of our religion."

Dickens knew what it meant to not only live his faith on his sleeves but to take his belief in a loving God, the acceptance of an inclusive religion; and the emphasis on doing good works to his readers. Even in his will, Dickens implored his children to guide themselves by the teachings of the New Testament as he said, "I most strongly and affectionately impress upon you the priceless value of the New Testament, and the study of that Book as the one unfailing guide in life." Dickens life and novels reflect how he kept Christ's story alive!

That is what we celebrate tonight, that God would come into our messy world and come among us as a baby and asks that we pay attention, and offer care, and move with gentleness and grace into a new way of living and loving together.

God comes to us once again to help us learn to forgo the anger, the prejudice, and the bitterness within our own hearts long enough to let God love us as God has intended to do. Let ourselves be loved as through the eyes of that infant in the manger. The baby Jesus doesn't care what you've done or who you think you are. He asks only that you hold onto him and receive the peace he has to give. The world will never change unless we accept his gift of unimaginable, immeasurable infinite love.

This is the love that comes to us this Christmas and with it comes the challenge to live such a life not just once a year, but from this moment on. This is the story and gift that has been handed down to us. So, when you leave here this evening make sure that story and gift is tucked deep inside of your heart so that, just like the sourdough enthusiasts, you claim the story as your identity and part of your life and who you are. It is a gift of love we need to give to others because it's a way to express your love to others. Then we can shout the good news every waking moment of our lives that this day a child has been born, a savior, whose name is Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.