



*Here if You Need Me*

December 26, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the First Sunday after Christmas Day

The Rt. Rev. Alan Gates

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*Nick: I'm going to share with you this morning a sermon written and prerecorded by our Bishop, The Rt. Rev. Alan Gates, to be shared with the congregations of the Diocese of Massachusetts on the First Sunday after Christmas, Sunday, December 26, 2021. These are Bishop Gates' words, interspersed with quotations from sources he used.*

One day, a Maine state trooper named Drew rolled out of bed, walked the dog, left his cereal bowl in the sink, and kissed his wife and four children goodbye. Two hours later he had died, the victim of a freak collision. Forty minutes after receiving word of his death, his wife Kate Braestrup sat in the living room with her friend Monica when the doorbell rang.

[In her memoir, written ten years after the fact,] Kate recollects Monica sprang to answer it. "A young man stood on the front steps clad in a spiffy dark suit, holding out a pamphlet. He beamed at Monica and said, 'Have you heard the Good News?' For a long second, Monica glared at him, not sure whether to punch him or laugh hysterically. She compromised by slamming the door. A few minutes later, the doorbell rang again. This time, I [Kate Braestrup] answered it. It was my neighbor, an elderly woman with whom I had exchanged no more than a dozen words. She had potholders on her hands, which held a pan of

brownies that were still hot from the oven and tears were rolling down her cheeks. 'I just heard,' she said.' That pan of brownies was, it later turned out, the leading edge of a tsunami. I didn't know that my family would be fed for weeks and weeks, that neighbors would come to mow the lawn. I did not know that I would have embraces and listening ears, that I would not be abandoned to do the labor of mourning alone. All I knew was that my neighbor was standing on the front step with her brownies and her tears. that she was the good news."

As time passed, the physical presence and ordinary compassion of her friends and neighbors at the time of Kate's shock and grief became for her the outline of a new life, a new purpose. She was drawn into a deep calling as an ordained minister, and has now served for 20 years as chaplain to the Maine Warden Service. She accompanies the wardens as they search the forests and inland lakes for those who are lost.

A child wanders unnoticed from the family picnic site into the thick woods, and Kate is there with the parents as the search proceeds.

A mountain hiker is stranded and succumbs to hypothermia, and Kate is with the dispirited rescuers and is sent to notify the family. An Alzheimer's patient drives into the night and disappears into the wilderness of northern Maine, and Kate sits with the anxious wife.



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Ten years after her husband's death, Kate Braestrup wrote a memoir entitled *Here if you Need Me*. The book has been out for more than a decade now, but her narrative and the book's title have remained with me powerfully ever since I read it.

“Here if you need me.” It encapsulates both her experience of crisis and her vocational call. For recollecting that moment of shock and grief all those years ago, Kate Braestrup writes, “It is possible that God is my neighbor with her pan of brownies standing on my doorstep. It is entirely possible, that the God I worship and serve with all my body, all my mind, all my soul, all my spirit, is love. It is enough. It's all the God I need,” she writes.

Hear again the prologue from the Gospel of John:

*In the beginning was the Word. And the word was with God. And the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. (John 1. 1-5)*

On Christmas Eve, we heard the story of the birth of Jesus. Luke gives us lots of details about that Nativity, replete with angels and shepherds in a lowly manger. And we love that story. But John's Gospel, with its poetry, comes along immediately afterwards, to tell us not *how* Jesus was born, but what it *meant*. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” Luke invites us to the Feast of the Nativity; John invites us to the Feast of the Incarnation. John proclaims this deep truth, that in Christ, God was, is, and ever shall be in our midst. “Here if you need me.”

God had been saying that to the people of God since time immemorial.

“Here I am,” said God, in the burning bush and they knew that God was mysterious. “Here I am,” said God, in the stone tablets of the law and they knew that God was stern. “Here I am,” said God, through the prophets and they knew that God was just. “Here I am,” said God, through the priests, and they knew that God was transcendent. “Here I am,” said God, through the kings, and they knew that God was powerful.

“Here I am,” said God, to the people, over and over and over again.

And yet the gulf between humanity and God was deep and wide, a product perhaps of our own natural human inattention and incomprehension. And so, in the fullness of time, God came in a new

way, a unique way, an unexpected way. In the fullness of time, God came born of Mary, God made flesh, an infant, to evoke that response which is the very definition of God.



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“Here I am,” said God, made flesh in a child.

And the people knew that God is love, no longer in burning bush, nor tablets of stone, not in the mighty deed of the king, nor the pious creed of the priest, nor the fearsome screed of the prophet, now God was in the helpless need of the child, an infant, the very definition of needful love.

The child born the night before last, proclaims that God is love. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being says John, letting us know that God's love is creative and life-giving. The entire Gospel of John is full of such imagery stories about water and seeds and salt and yeast and bread, all the basic elements that give life and growth. John's is a profoundly nourishing Gospel. “What has come into being in him was life,” light shining in the darkness. That darkness has not overcome, says John, reminding us that God's love is finally victorious, that it cannot be defeated.

John's Gospel does not deny that the world is replete with doom and fear. But God's love is stronger than fear and death, is the insistent message of John the Evangelist, and the absolute proclamation of our faith. Do we not need to hear this now? How we do need to hear that God is with us always: “Here if you need me.”

God knows both the power and the limits of this promise, because once it was God's own self in Jesus, who was the helpless, agonizing and abandoned one on the Cross. If God is love, then can we not say that in those moments of Christ's passion, it was Simon of Cyrene, and it was the women at the foot of the Cross, and it was Joseph of Arimathea, who became the manifestations of God in moments when God's own self in Jesus needed to be loved.

The Good News of the Incarnation is not only that once upon a time, God became flesh. The Good News is that in so doing, God sanctified humankind, in order that after the model of our Savior and his Mother, we ourselves might be for one another incarnations of God's love.

“Here if you need me,” say hospital chaplains named Katie and Jenny and Michelle and Anoma to Covid victims and their families in Boston area hospitals. “Here if you need me,” say Jennifer and Paul and Molly and Christy and James, as they welcome and serve unhoused persons through our Cathedral's MANNA ministry. “Here if you need me,” said a nun named Christine and a deacon named Bruce to incarcerated people in their isolation. “Here if you need me,” say chaplains named Paul and James and Anna and Aaron to those serving in the armed forces pushing back their loneliness and uncertainty.

“Here if you need me,” says every woman or man who distributes food, combats illness, works for peace, teaches or volunteers in schools.

“Here if you need me,” says every parent of every anxious child, every healthcare worker in the midst of a protracted pandemic, every friend to one in distress.



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“Here if you need me,” says God in the manger the Word made flesh, Jesus, to me and to you.

God is love, and in these 12 days of Christmas, love is born anew, reminding us once again that in countless manifestations, trumpeted or barely noticed, predicted or unexpected, bidden or unbidden, God is with us. The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

Deep blessings to you, dear friends; deep blessings of the Incarnation to you.

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates: “Here If you Need Me “ December 26, 2021