

**SERMON**  
**Christmas Eve, 2019**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**

Most mornings I wake up in the dark, before the sun rises, before the tasks of my day are expected to begin. And I lie there for as much as an hour, fully awake. I don't think about all the things I need to accomplish—that would send me into a tither. But rather, I practice the “art of lying in bed” and tune into *God's immeasurable spaciousness*. It feels a bit like heaven-on-earth. As the sun rises I see its light through my curtains. And then, all of a sudden, as if there were a time-to-wake-up-voice somewhere in the garden, all the birds start chattering. Heaven on earth. This time of year, sometimes I wander into the living room while it is still dark. I turn on the Christmas tree lights, sit in a particular chair, and just gaze. An ordinary tree is transformed with bits of light and memories. As visions of heaven go, a Christmas tree is top on the list—ordinary bits from our ordinary lives are transformed by the light—reminding us of *God's immeasurable spaciousness* at the heart of life.

When I was young I liked to rummage around in the attic. There was *immeasurable spaciousness* in the old attic. There were *Life* magazines with pictures of important world events that happened before I was born. There stacks of *National Geographics* with pictures of people from different cultures— their faces, their clothing—or no clothes at all. And there were books. Lots of dusty old books that once belonged to my grandmother. A treasure-trove. For a child, the attic was a bit of heaven on earth. Among the books I found one with a leather cover—the pages were like onion skin and edged in gold. I knew it must be an important book. The title of the book was “The Art of Living.” Who would have guessed that there is more to life than just living through it. I read the pages with great interest. What I remember most was Chapter Five: “The Art of Lying in Bed.” It recommended waking at 5 am and described the benefits and creativity afforded

when you make a practice of lying in bed before dawn. You see, lying awake in the early morning darkness is not about being lazy—it is about connecting with *God's immeasurable spaciousness* at the heart of life. Inside and outside. There in the calm and still of darkness we get in touch with mystery, the beating of your own heart, and the beauty of our own being. And right there at the heart of things, is God. Heaven on earth.

The Christmas story according to Luke is about as good as it gets! It is nothing less than a vision of *God's immeasurable spaciousness*—when heaven breaks through and we come face to face with God's messengers and God. Luke's story begins before dawn under a cold night sky. Luke's shepherds are bedded down and before the first sheep begins to move, the shepherds see heaven open. Luke's shepherds see a burst of light—more brilliant than a million trillion stars. And in all that *mysterious divine spaciousness*, they hear words of hope and peace.

“Now, get up and go see for yourselves what God is doing,”  
say the angels of the night.

“Go to Bethlehem and see the child that has been born. A little bit of heaven on earth come to save the world and each of us in it—our teacher and guide in the *Art of Living*. God is with us!”

Did you ever wonder why it is that as a practice we bring out the Christmas creche at this time of year and then pack it up and store it away in a box someplace in some closet when the New Year comes? The Christmas creche is Luke's wonderful vision of *God's immeasurable spaciousness* at the heart of life—of heaven on earth! God with us, forever, in Jesus. Immanuel. Why do we put it away only to be remembered once a year? As

visions of heaven go, the scene at Bethlehem is about as good as it gets. Before the break of dawn in the mystery and spaciousness of a mother and father's love for their newborn child, we see a bit of Heaven on earth. God is with us!

A few years back, I decided to put a creche on my bookshelf and keep it there all year long. It started with Joseph and Mary and the baby, and a donkey made from some dark ebony-like wood. Then I bought a few shepherds and sheep. Then I found some kings I liked. Then I found an African Eland, the largest of the antelopes made from the same dark wood, with tall horns. It looked like an angel to me, so I added it. I learned something new this year about creches. Need I say, after our own pageant and live donkey, there is a good reason we'll never see a scratch-and-sniff Christmas card. Oh, my. "*Little donkey, little donkey...*" Then came an elephant. And then a hippopotamus. I added a lion. And three monkeys to my creche. Then I found an eagle. And a mouse. And finally an alligator, even though I really don't like alligators. I kept adding and adding until the creche took up an entire wall in my bookshelf. I looked again and the creche had become the "Peaceable Kingdom." And here tonight, this creche includes many of these same creatures.

Do you know about the "Peaceable Kingdom?" Luke's vision of *heaven on earth* in Bethlehem is grounded in Isaiah's vision of the *Peaceable Kingdom*. Isaiah's vision is even more expansive, more inclusive, more spacious: Wolves live with lambs; cows and bears graze together. The leopard lies down with the kid. The calf and the lion.... And Isaiah says, "a little child shall lead them." Isaiah's *vision in the night* is a place where former enemies, even natural enemies, are reconciled. It's a beautiful vision of the Kingdom of God. Heaven on earth. Of Reconciliation and Peace.

Edward Hicks, a Pennsylvania painter in the 1800's painted this vision sixty-one times over his lifetime. Each painting is influenced by different issues—according to the personal and national issues and divisions of his day. Just like Isaiah whose prophetic visions were fraught with sociopolitical tension of his day. Isaiah envisions a new social reality created by God. Isaiah gives us a vision of *God's immeasurable spaciousness* at the heart of life. Isaiah names the vision *Immanuel*. "God with us." Luke sees this vision in the face of Jesus. Together, they give us tonight's vision. The child we celebrate tonight, on one of the darkest nights of the year, born of a young woman 800 years later after Isaiah, 2000 years ago, is the Vision born into flesh. To be among us. Heaven on earth! The one who inaugurates the rule of justice, righteousness and peace.

The vision requires that we put an ax to resentments and biases that have taken root in our hearts. We might have to refrain from demanding our way and relinquish some of our self-importance, small-mindedness, in order to let God be God! In order to take our places as God's creatures among all God's creatures. The vision requires that we be converted to genuine concern for others, who are different from ourselves, in other parts of the world, from different cultures, and with different perspectives.

Whenever we feel the limits of our own perspectives, we are in need of God's immeasurable spaciousness. The vision requires us to see not only people in the world, but to take seriously the needs and lives of the whole ecosystem—of animals, and plants. This year I think I will add some trees and fish to my creche—into God's Peaceable Kingdom. This year, I want to include Jesus, not only as a baby, but as a grown man, the Good Shepherd—who leads us to the green grass, the cool still waters, and is our advocate in the dark and dangerous places of life. The one who comes to serve, not to be served.

Christmas comes in the dark of the night. It is not the end but the beginning of a transformed world through Christ—the promise of God and the hope of the world. Be cheered! At the utmost depths of life is the *immeasurable spaciousness of God in Christ*. No matter who you are, no matter how much you have or don't have, no matter what you've done or left undone, the *immeasurable spaciousness of God in Christ*—heaven on earth—is here for you.

Before you get up on Christmas morning, before you get distracted with stuff and agendas and to-do lists—lie awake in the darkness. Pause, rest, become quiet and still. It is all here, for you and for everyone. The peaceable kingdom is God's intention for our world—Christ, the child at the center, is the restorer of peace and rules our hearts as he will one day, through us, bring peace on earth.

Remember to include yourself at the creche—for all of us are invited into the *Peaceable Kingdom of God*. The most important lesson for living is to make room for everyone—for God's love is at the heart of *God's immeasurable spaciousness in Christ*.

Amen