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Grace River Forest

*In These Days*

Do you know the term *Climate anxiety*?

“Climate, or eco, anxiety is loosely defined as a “chronic fear of environmental doom,” mental distress or anxiety associated with worsening environment conditions or negative emotions related to climate change. The anxiety can manifest itself through many different emotions including insomnia”

Searches for “climate anxiety” or “eco-anxiety” increased by 4,590% from 2018 to 2023, according to one set of data. The two most commonly searched questions were “What is eco anxiety?” and “How to deal with climate anxiety?”

“A recent survey of 16 to 25-year-olds found that two in three say climate change makes them feel sad and afraid. And 45% report worries about climate interrupting their daily lives.”

For you it might not be climate anxiety that weighs on you, stalking you at night and placing itself on your heart. It could be the fate of our democracy or the effects that social media and technology are having on our sense of self and sense of our shared common life together that seems to fray further with each fading year. Or it’s closer to home. It could be that there is one less person around your table this Christmas, or you are spending time with an aging loved one for whom you can’t stop wondering whether this Christmas will be their last. Or the name of the weight on your heart goes by nostalgia. You cannot seem to recreate the feelings you used to have on this night for others or yourself and you are disappointed. Or you are alone, despite all your dreams for a family, or life has simply dealt you some things that are horrible and you wonder what the point of it all is. I’m sure you have filled in the contours of the burdens that befriend you. Like Isaiah you might call it, The yoke of your burden, the bar across your shoulders, or the rod of your oppressor whatever and however they manifest.

We know how it begins. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.”

In those days. That is how it starts. And we get some details. They were a Jewish family living under Roman occupation making their way to Bethlehem for the census. And while they were there Mary gave birth. Luke points out the detail that there was no room for them in the inn, so Jesus was born in a stable or a cave. There are shepherds and angels and heavenly hosts and the gloria (which even now begins many of our liturgies.)

I’m not the first one to point out how we get used to all of this. We domesticate and commercialize it. This is how God came into the world. The God of all creation and of

countless galaxies is the infant born to Mary. The wailing baby wrapped in bands of cloth- look there and you will find the fulness of the only wise God. As Christ is- so God is. The one who was born in a manger because there was *no room* in the inn- before him every knee will bend. The one who was nursed and cared for by Mary, the teenager, that is the word of the Father now in flesh appearing.

In those days. People lived in a land of deep darkness, some occupied by empires, others by different things. Alone, afraid, like they were living at the end of their rope. A threshold. An apocalypse, climate or otherwise.

These days too. People walk in darkness that comes in a thousand hues. We've been there. We keep gathering year after year, with all that accompanies us, not to simply recite history, although we do, not to recreate some longed for past, but, because the child that was born, the son that was given, the light that shone- is born again for you.

This day. This night. In your night. Jesus Christ, eternal God, son of the eternal father, has hallowed this world by his coming in mercy.

The little one was born, grew, lived, died, and rose again for you. In those days, across time, and in this moment God is not far away and you will never be abandoned or forgotten. That is the marvel of this night. The heart of this night. The heart of God came in weakness and vulnerability to walk with you through every season so that we can hear and see and witness that heart even now.

From Bethlehem to River Forest- this newborn is God's undying sign and promise to you wrapped in flesh. Promise that every burden you carry will not be with you forever. A promise that even when the world or yours ends, or changes, that is not the end of the story that began 2000 years ago or at the birth of creation itself.

Like the shepherds, we can travel and find this promise among us tonight. Go to the places where he is born. Bread and wine in your hands. Water poured. Word that announces in our deepest despair that we belong to this child. The places where the little ones of this earth help us step into a new day. Where the wounds of creation itself are broken open. There we bow as before the manger because as one Lutheran theologian might say, those are the places and times where God's tomorrow begins. Tonight.

In the words of one poet and hymn writer, "O Word made incarnate, O Sun of delight, dispelling the dark with compassion and light, divine common hope of the poor and the least, we witness your dawn on this luminous feast."

