

In the Midst of Earth  
Christmas Eve 2018

Luke 2:1-20; "[Salvation is created in the midst of the earth](#)" by Pavel Tschesnokoff (communion anthem); "Light is kindled in the darkness"<sup>1</sup> by David Bjorlin (communion hymn)

I have a friend who would have *loved* to be here tonight. If humanly possible, I know that she also would have loved to help Richard and Liza and everyone set up the flowers and greens. She would have relished these lilies and snapdragons; she would have gawked over these rare roses from Colombia, the brilliant daisies from South Africa. I can hear her cooing over the poinsettias, the cedars, and the white pines. I'm quite sure she was here in spirit.

She was a gardener at heart. She didn't like to be front and center; she was at home in a garden. She nurtured plants, and they nurtured her back. When she was ill, she told me once that caring for a big blue hydrangea in her backyard was her "therapy". When she first took that hydrangea home; it was bare of blooms, wilted from neglect. Yet, she planted it in a sunny spot in her yard and nurtured it back to health. It was not just the blue hydrangea; it was any plant, really. In mere earth, she saw possibility.

Her son is the same age as mine, and before he was born, she might have told you that she was never one of those girls who'd always known she wanted to be a mother; she had always felt more ambivalent about it. But when Sam was born, he became the center of her world, the heart of her heart, the flesh of her flesh. When people asked how her attitude had changed, she'd exclaim, "Well, I didn't know God was going to give me Sam!"

Sam, almost seven, of course is bursting with possibility. But Yvette's beauty was that she could see that in anyone. To receive her smile was to receive an invitation: "Be here. Be you. Be exactly you." At least that's how I felt. She cared about what's real. Whether you'd be having a day when you felt like dirt or like you didn't have it all together, it didn't matter; she saw you, and, at least in my experience, you felt beautiful right there in the midst of it--as if Yvette the gardener could already see the beauty and the possibility that was emerging from you, that was you.

On Christmas Eve two years ago, the cancer that she had been fighting for years seized her brain, almost completely. I was at her house, terrified and devastated to witness her unable to respond to us. When she left for the hospital and I left for the church's Christmas Eve services, there in Chicago, I hoped beyond every hope that I would see her again, but in that moment, it was not sure. The next day, I drove home here to Michigan to be with my family, and the night after that, hearing that she was declining more, drove back to Chicago. She fought until the beginning of January.

She's on my mind especially tonight, and perhaps your beloved ones are on your mind as well: those who have seen possibility in you; who have cared for you, and for whom you have cared; who have met you when you might have felt like that wilted, neglected hydrangea, and through whose presence and patience, you bloomed. Perhaps tonight you relate to that ambivalence that Yvette felt before becoming a parent; perhaps you feel ambivalent about Jesus in your life, unsure about God in your midst. Where does Jesus fit in your life, you might wonder. Perhaps you feel that things are quite okay without the burden, the trouble, that God might ask of you. I completely get it: in our world, so many things are said

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, from verses 1-2: *Gifts of goodness yet unfold us--all around, beneath, above--signs of beauty still persisting, symbols of God's constant love. Though the wrong appears victorious--violence, prejudice, and pride--hope still rises from the wreckage; joy and grief stand side by side. We will feel both pain and promise, terror's sting and love's new birth, as we walk in light and shadow on God's blessed and bleeding earth.*

in God's name that hurt, that are meant to exclude, rather than, like Yvette's smile, to include, to welcome, to say, "Be here. Be you. Exactly you."

Whether we feel ready or not--and who among us, what parent among us can ever say that they're completely ready--Jesus tonight is born to us and in us. This means that God has not given up on us yet! In you, and in me, God sees only possibility. God sees you, earth to earth and ashes to ashes, as one hundred percent beautiful. Whether you are married, partnered, divorced, widowed, single, or - like Mary and Joseph - feeling like "it's complicated," God sees you as beautiful. Whether you are right at home, feeling like you're right where you need to be or, like Mary and Joseph, far from it, you are beautiful. Whether you have everything you desire or, like Mary and Joseph, you're trying to make do with much less than you need, you are entirely beautiful. God sees you, God smiles upon you, and coos, "Beloved child, grow in my love. Be you, be exactly you. I am here." Thanks be to God.