

*A sermon given on Christmas Eve 2009,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Here If You Need Me

On a Monday morning in the spring of 1996, a Maine state trooper named Drew rolled out of bed, walked the dog, left his cereal bowl in the sink, kissed his wife and four children good-bye. Two hours later he was dead in his cruiser, the victim of a freak collision with a fully-loaded trailer truck. 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. Kate recollects:

Monica sprang to answer it. A young man stood on the front steps, clad in a spiffy dark suit..., exuding a scent of soap and virtue. Holding out a pamphlet, he beamed at Monica. "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 answered it. It was my neighbor, an elderly woman I had exchanged no more than a dozen words with in the ten years I'd lived [in town]. She had pot holders on her hands, which held a pan of brownies 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 neighborhood men would come to ... mow the lawn, get the oil changed in my car. I did not know that my house would be cleaned and the laundry done, 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 stoop with her brownies and her tears: that she *was* the Good News.¹

As time passed and Kate Braestrup began to heal, she decided to embrace a second vocation which, in fact, her husband had been dreaming about at the time of his death: to prepare for ministry in the Unitarian Church. His calling became hers. 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 purpose in life. She was drawn forward to an unexpected but deep calling as a chaplain to the search-and-rescue officers of the Maine Warden Service.

A child wanders unnoticed from the family picnic site into the thick woods; Kate is with the parents as the search proceeds. A mountain hiker is lost and succumbs to hypothermia; Kate is with the dispirited rescuers, and is sent to notify the family. An Alzheimer's patient drives into the night and disappears in the wilderness of northern Maine; Kate sits with the anxious wife.

Here If You Need Me is the title of Kate Braestrup's memoir. Here if you need me. It is what she is: Here. Here with the bewildered, the panic-

stricken, the fearful, the numb. A diminutive woman in rugged black pants, heavy boots, and clerical collar, she looks (her friends say) “like a cross between an effeminate priest and a gas station attendant.” She is an unlikely yet profoundly strengthening presence to the care-worn. Kate Braestrup explains it this way:

[My seminary professors asked me: ‘Why are you here?’ My brother wrote me: ‘You don’t really believe in God, do you?’]

Dear professors, dear brother. It is possible that God is the way [an old woman lays] her head against my shoulder, trusting me as I hold her; [it is possible that God is] Drew’s arms holding me in our fertile scent; [that God is a Maine warden] walking out of the woods hand in hand with a child lost, then found. It is possible that God is my neighbor with her pan of brownies standing on my doorstep. It is entirely possible, that is, that the God I serve and worship with all my body, all my mind, all my soul, and all my spirit is love (I John 4:8). It’s enough. It’s all the God I need. [pp. 53-55]

“Here if you need me.” God had been saying that to the people of God since time immemorial. Here I am. Here if you need me.

“Here I am,” said God in the burning bush, and they knew that God was mysterious. “Here I am,” said God in stone tablets of 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 lofty. “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 chasm of 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. “Here I am,” said God, made flesh in a child. And the people knew that God is Love.

No longer in burning bush nor in 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 need of an infant, the very manifestation of needful love. God is Love. The child born this night proclaims that God is Love.

Here I am. Here if you need me. It is, perhaps, no wonder that not all of God’s people could understand such a statement from God when spoken in the form of a child. They could not fully understand it two thousand years ago; we cannot fully understand it now. What can it mean to say, “Here if you need me,” if the promise comes from one who seems as helpless as an infant? What, I wonder, does it mean for God to say “Here if you need me” to the grieving parent or the jobless breadwinner? Can God, I wonder, possibly know the limitation of comforting words at such a time?

The answer came to me with new force last Sunday as we focused on Mary, the Mother of Our Lord. Singing our tribute to Mary, we recalled a later moment – not Mary in the stable, but Mary at the foot of the Cross upon which her son was dying.

*Sing we, too, of Mary's sorrows,
of the sword that pierced her through,
When beneath the cross of Jesus
she his weight of suffering knew...* [Hymn 278]

“Here if you need me.” Of course God knows both the limits and the absolute power of this promise, because once it was God, in Jesus, who was helpless, agonizing, abandoned. If God is Love, then can we not say that in that moment, Mary was the manifestation of God, when God himself needed to be loved? To know the strengthening presence and compassion which is simultaneously both short of, and far beyond, immediate solution and resolution – this is the Love which is God.

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, 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,” says the chaplain named Kate to search-and-rescue workers in their fatigue. “Here if you need me,” says a grandmother named Sammy to incarcerated women in their loneliness. “Here if you need me,” says a priest named Dan to soldiers with whom he prepares to ship out to Afghanistan. “Here if you need me,” says every woman or man who distributes food, combats illness, works for peace. “Here if you need me,” says every parent of every anxious child; every friend to one in distress. “Here if you need me,” says God in the manger, to me and to you.

God is love. And this night, love is born anew, reminding us once again that, in countless manifestations – trumpeted or barely noticed, predictable or unexpected, bidden or unbidden – God is with us, loving us so dearly.

Christmas blessings to you, in the name of the newborn Christ.

ⁱ Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me* (NY: Little, Brown & Co., 2007)