Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

During the holidays two years ago, an exhibit was on display at the Cleveland Museum of Art entitled *Painting the Modern Garden: Monet to Matisse*. The exhibit, developed in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Arts in London, explained the role of gardens in the paintings of Claude Monet and his contemporaries. I learned through this exhibit that many of the Impressionists cultivated their own gardens as artistic expression, which then inspired their paintings. The centerpiece of the exhibit was Monet’s water lily triptych. Though conceived as a unified trio, the three paintings were sold separately after Monet’s death in 1926. One resides here at the Museum of Art, one at the St. Louis Art Museum and one at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. The three museums collaborated to display the paintings together at each of the three locations. If you were fortunate enough to attend this exhibit here in Cleveland, perhaps you recall walking through the galleries and then coming into a room and there it was, that magnificent triptych – blues and greens and pinks – 42 feet wide – it was awe-inspiring. What intrigues me so about Monet’s water lilies is that when you get up close to the painting you see all of the very small, individual brush strokes. Yet, when you step back, the individual strokes blend together into a breath-taking, harmonious whole. You can’t take in the full scene, the story of the painting until you step back. On this holy night, we come together in gratitude for Jesus coming into this world and shining a light on what it means for each one of us to be both individually integral to our life together, and part of a mere chapter in a much larger story. Let us step back and take a look.

Isaiah proclaims: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” For 400
years, for 16 generations after Malachi, God did not speak through a prophet. Then, Jesus came into this world. “Those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” God’s voice had been silent. Imagine the darkness, the emptiness, the futility, the fear. Then, the light shined and God’s abiding, profound, eternal love was known. Evelyn Underhill, a prolific writer on Christian spirituality, comments on the awesome nature of God: “His abrupt creative entrance into every human life, coming to us, touching us, changing us in every crisis, grief, shock, sacrifice, flashing up on life’s horizon like lightning just when we had settled down on the natural level, and casting over the landscape a light we had never dreamed of before” (Christopher L. Webber, ed., *Advent with Evelyn Underhill*, New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2006, pg. 23).

God shined a light…on great love and profound peace…on justice and righteousness…meant for each and every one of us. Isaiah proclaims: “He will establish and uphold [his kingdom] with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.” God calls to us to create and nurture a world grounded in justice and righteousness and God assures us, through coming into this world, that He will be with us every step of the way, loving, comforting and inspiring: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Underhill offers a wonderful insight. She talks about seeing life, “persons and choices from the angle of eternity” (p. 21). She is suggesting we step back, take in the full story of life: approach life from the perspective of the whole novel, not just our chapter, follow the thread of the story, which is always weaving towards, always striving for justice and righteousness. Approaching life from the angle of eternity, we live in God’s love and within the arc of Creation, and that context shapes how we prioritize our life, how we make decisions, how we interact with one another. If the arc of Creation is towards justice and righteousness, then how do we prioritize our life, how do we make decisions, how do we interact with one another?
We so easily get wrapped up in the minutiae of life, don’t we? – perhaps a run-in with a customer service person who doesn’t seem to understand anything about customer service; perhaps a disagreement with the neighbor over tree trimming along the property line; perhaps a re-design of the grocery store with the dairy where the produce used to be and now we need to modify our grocery shopping navigation. And, more seriously, at times we are overwhelmed by the challenging issues of life: earning a living, family dynamics, health issues. Yet, Jesus lives with us through it all and shines a light on the larger story. Living in the context of the arc of God’s Creation offers growth, compassion, and healing…growth, compassion, and healing.

Underhill summarizes our role in Creation: “The whole teaching of Christ hinges on the deep mystery and [awe-inspiring] significance of our existence; and God, as the supreme and ever-present factor in every situation, from the tiniest to the most universal. The span of His understanding goes from the lilies of the field to the most terrible movements of history. He takes in all the darkness and anxiety of our situation, whether social or personal; and within and beyond all, He finds the creative action of God, the one Reality, the one Life, working with a steadfast and unalterable love, sometimes by the direct action of circumstance and sometimes secretly within each soul in prayer. And this creative action, so hidden and so penetrating, is the one thing that matters in human life” (pgs. 23-24).

It’s not our story, it’s God’s story. We are one chapter and God is working through each one of us. A single stroke of paint on the canvas is meaningless on its own. Yet, every stroke of a painting is significant as a part of the whole. We are individually integral to our life together – each of our own individual lives takes on meaning in how we interact with each other and this world. Step back and see how we as individuals blend together into a breath-taking harmonious whole. Jesus, coming into this world, shines a light on what our relationship with God and with
one another is all about: justice and righteousness through love and compassion. “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” There is peace in knowing we have a role to play in this magnificent story. There is peace in knowing God lives with us through all of life, loving, comforting, inspiring. There is peace in knowing that justice and righteousness will be the crowning glory. On this most holy night, Jesus’ light shines on living with God and for one another, in the name of Love and Peace. Amen.