

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

This past Monday, a letter appeared in the Guardian newspaper in the UK; it was about Brandon Bernard, who was executed for a horrific crime he took part in at the age of eighteen. The writer, Jen Wasserstein, said, “When my friend Brandon Bernard was executed this month, he was a different man from the 18-year-old accessory to a double-murder.

Spending two decades in solitary confinement changed him. Brandon never had a single infraction on death row. He did church youth outreach to help teens make better choices in life. He taught me many life lessons. To be open-hearted yet level headed. To remain calm and patient. To be respectful and thoughtful and an attentive listener. To be kind. To live with a sense of optimism like one I’ve never witnessed... I want to hate the sin, but forgive the sinner... After... two decades of regret and reform...

Brandon became a beautiful person. When we killed Brandon, we killed the belief that one can change.”

We now enter a season that gives us the opportunity to regard with awe and wonder that great mystery: the Incarnation. God, the very force of

existence that dwells beyond time and beyond the limits of the material world, God becomes human. God becomes subject to time and to flesh and to the limits of this world, because despite all of the darkness in which we walk, God believes we can change.

God does not come with force, to command that everything suddenly be as God would have it, to sweep with a mighty arm across creation and obliterate our free will and make us do exactly what God wants us to do; no, God comes with the least power and authority, a child in the family of a skilled labourer in a small town, but a child bearing the divine Good News that God has faith that no matter how far we've fallen, no matter how dark our actions, no matter how grave our betrayal of the law of love, God still believes that we can be beautiful people. By taking on human flesh, God manifests God's belief that we can be redeemed to our image at creation that God looked on and called "Very good".

When I read Jen Wasserstein's letter about Brandon Bernard, I thought: What if we've become a people that believes in vengeance more than redemption? What if we've become a people who spend more time and energy hitting back, shouting down, making sure that no one gets more

than we think they deserve? What has that done to our souls and spirit?  
How can we change? Can we save ourselves from the stony-hearted  
world we've created?

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--  
on them light has shined.

We cannot save ourselves; but to us a child is born, a Son is given who  
bears the message that God still believes that we can be beautiful people.  
God coming among us, God with us, calls us to share in that faith. God  
calls us to bring the light of that Good News into the dark places: the  
places of oppression, and hatred, and selfishness, and greed within  
ourselves and within the societies we've shaped.

God is born and lives among us. God chooses not the way of power  
abused, or force, or condemnation; God chooses a way of welcome and  
intense, demanding love. God chooses to receive and spread the Good  
News of redemption, not those deemed worthy of earthly authority or

prestige, but a bunch of grubby shepherds, a handful of Galilean fisherman, prostitutes, tax collectors, people debilitated by the demons that possess them, and even, in Luke's Gospel, a man being executed off death row. Their stories, tonight's story, still speaks through the ages: God has faith that we can change; God has faith that we can be beautiful people.

At a conference I attended (virtually) in November, the evangelical theologian Brian McLaren made the point that we are never meant to be the end user of any of God's blessings. Any blessing from God is meant to be passed forward, to be given again and again. The shepherds knew this as did the disciples who would come to follow this child when he began his ministry thirty years later. Take time in this season of Christmas to really sit with this blessed mystery of Incarnation; and as Mary bore the Word made flesh into the world, we are called to bear this Word forward into our present world, a world that often seems to have forgotten that it can be beautiful. May we take God's faithfulness into our own heart, so that this newborn light shines into the dark places within us; and then may we turn outward in God's intense, demanding, welcoming love and bear that light into a dark world. Amen.