
The Word According to Shy'Kyra Aughtry

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The First Sunday after Christmas – Year A**

In the beginning was the snow. It came down, at first, like any other snow in western New York in late December. There were the weather forecasts with their dire predictions and the reminders to check on elderly neighbors. When the initial flakes started flying, they came early enough in the season still to excite small children and bring sleds out of garages. Hour by hour, though, the snow fell heavier and faster until the drifts grew higher than the children's heads and the sleds and everything else that was left outside got swallowed. People in their cars stopped driving because they couldn't see their way forward and employees called loved ones to say they'd be spending the night at work. Lights flickered and transformers blew. Sirens blared loudly the growing sense of panic. Nursing home staff piled more and more blankets on their patients while parents counted how many days of baby formula they'd have left if the stores remained closed.

It would be the vulnerable—the sick, the elderly the disabled, those who lacked adequate shelter or food—it would be the vulnerable, of course, who suffered most in the recent Christmas blizzard in Buffalo. This is the way it invariably is in disasters, whether they are natural or man-made. Of the 39 individuals found dead thus far in Buffalo, the majority have been poor people and people of color. While Black people make up only 14 percent percent of the residents of Erie County, NY, they account for 51 percent of the dead thus far. And yet—and yet—in the midst of so much that unfolded in a painfully predictable way in Buffalo last week, so much that played out just as it always seems to in our world, at least one thing surprising and counterintuitive occurred. Right as everyone was sure how this sad story was going to end, a different narrative came forth courtesy of a woman named Sha'Kyra Aughtry. More about Sha'Kyra in a minute. But first, the story. Not that story—the blizzard story—but The Story.

The Christmas story, much like the Buffalo storm story, is a familiar story and yet, in the end, a surprising one as well. The familiar birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are chock full of astonishing twists and turns. A young peasant woman is chosen to give birth to a king. A group of laborers leave their jobs smack dab in the middle of the night shift on the advice of some singing angels. The plot of a wicked despot to kill a refugee child is foiled by a band of roving astrologers. Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Jesus' birth are full of twists and turns. But it is in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John—not actually a story, of course; more of a theological treatise—it is in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John that we encounter the real "whopper" of Christmas, perhaps the greatest surprise of all.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being through him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Well, did you catch that? Did you hear the surprise? *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* The darkness did not overcome it. What weird and wondrous news this is! That the force of Love that gave birth to all creation, the Love that gave birth to each of us, the Love that human apathy and greed and sin and selfishness have consistently rejected, the Love that you and I have consistently rejected—that this Love will not give up on us, even when we give up on it; that it is with us still, not just in the places where Love typically flourishes, but in the places where it is invariably extinguished, the places where everyone knows it can't survive. In those drifts of grief and pain piled so high in our lives that our spirits have long since suffocated. In those places in our world where, even though a story's end has yet to be written, we're pretty sure we know what that end will be. In the news of yet another catastrophic bombing in Ukraine. In another young life lost to drug abuse or mental illness. In our nation's continuing political gridlock. In our reluctance to

confront racism and other evils because, after all, nothing's really ever going to change. In the family gatherings this season that haven't gone how we had hoped or expected, in the family gatherings that didn't happen, in the relationships that remain tenuous or fractured—this is where God appears in our world, this is where Love manifests itself, against all odds. And this is where, according to this morning's gospel, Love abides. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. This is where Love lives—in darkness and despair, amid hopelessness and hatred. This is Love's natural habitat—among the broken, disjointed, and stuck places of our world and among the broken, disjointed, and stuck people. This is where Love somehow, amazingly, flourishes. This is the miracle of Christmas. That the story turns out so differently than how any reasonable person might have expected. That, in Jesus, Love is not put off by hate, nor light by darkness, nor life by death.

Which brings us back to Buffalo, NY and Sha'Kyra Aughtry. Did you hear about Sha'Kyra Aughtry? She found a disabled man trapped in a snow drift in front of her Buffalo home on Christmas Eve. Now anyone—anyone—who's ever lived in anywhere in the vicinity of the Great Lakes can predict right now exactly how this story's going to go down. Anyone, it seems, except Sha'Kyra Aughtry.

Aughtry was up early that morning, getting ready for a big day with her three children. Puttering around the house, she heard the cries of 64-year-old Joey White. White had wandered away from the group home where he lived, presumably to try to walk to his job as a janitor at a local movie theatre. Only he never made it. Instead, he fell into a snow bank just across the street from Aughtry's home. Somehow, he made enough noise to attract her attention, and she ventured out to rescue him. What happened next was even more remarkable. Finding that White's next of kin could not make it through the storm to come and pick White up, Aughtry proceeded to attend to this perfect stranger's every need right there in her own home for over 24 hours straight. She cut him out of his frozen clothes, bathed him, fed him, and attended to his frostbite. When it became clear that Joey required medical attention, she made over one hundred calls to 911. The system was overwhelmed and unable to respond. Finally, desperate, she got help by posting a live video on Facebook. Reflecting on the whole episode afterwards, a friend of White's noted, "This kind woman came out and heard a human being in deep distress and did something about it, which most people in this day and age wouldn't necessarily do." But Sha'Kyra Aughtry did. And God did. God does. You and I can do it, too. Like Sha'Kyra, we can become God bearers in this brand New Year, narrative changers, birthing Love in the midst of hate, hope in the midst of despair, light in the midst of darkness—light that no darkness can overcome.^[1]

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . That Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have beheld his glory. May we now become at one with his glory, full of grace and truth. Amen.

^[1] The story of Ms. Aughtry and Mr. White has been widely circulated. I first read about it in The Washington Post ("A disabled man was stuck in a Buffalo snowbank. A stranger heard his cry and saved him," December 27, 2022).