

From time to time when I was a little girl, my mom would buy us activity books. On their pages were all sorts of games and puzzles. There were mazes and things to color. But my favorite things to be found were the pages with a series of dots, each numbered for me to connect. Yes, I loved to connect the dots. Connect the dots to reveal animals and peoples and flowers. Connect the dots to make what was not there – and yet somehow there -- apparent on the page. Given an activity book with these I can assure you that I'd go through the entire book, fending off my brothers if need be, in order to do them all -- to have them all for myself.

It was one of my favorite activities – the connections were there, the order was there, but somehow, somehow, the picture needed me to complete it. Somehow, somehow, I was an important piece of the puzzle – my actions or inactions, my attention, was needed to make the picture come out right – and what was needed to make the picture come out right was to get the dots in the right order.

I think that people are born to connect the dots. I think we strive to see the picture that is revealing itself and to find the meaning behind it. And Christmas Eve may be the best possible of all the connect the dots nights.

There is the Emperor Augustus – a secular ruler whose edict has the whole world scrambling as he takes a census – in order to increase his tax revenue. We have Joseph and his pregnant bride to be – caught in that web and going to what must have been a very large House of David family reunion – it was so large that Joseph and his soon to be wife – great with child -- were squeezed in, not on the inflatable bed, but in the room under the house where the animals stayed.

And then there are shepherds – who lived as outsiders in field on the outskirts of town. Some towns made sure of that – enacting laws to keep them there. But even if none had been in effect, their work was solitary, their hours long: no Sabbath, no religious rituals, no coming for community celebrations. Few trusted them – they were said to be liars – so much so that their word was not good in court – they were numbered with tax collectors and prostitutes as people to avoid.

And Angels! Oh Lord! Angels! Bright, shining, radiant with the presence of God – coming down from heaven – to earth! Angels coming to shepherds! Say what! Shepherds! Telling of Good news! Good news for all people – Good news to Share – but particularly – Good News for them! To Them! Yes! To them! To shepherds –

lowly born and lonely living. For them! A savior! The messiah – a child is born! It is a sign of God's love for all people but for them! Can it be for them?

And the shepherds struggle to make sense of it – they tried to connect the dots. But it made no sense. And so driven by yearning, I bet they didn't even know they had – so long had they tended their fields alone – they decide to go to Bethlehem to see the child – the child of whom the angels spoke. They needed to see and to know, to make that connection.

And they found it just as the angels said. A child – a baby – born to a young couple – poor like them. The Messiah! Could he be the savior? No guards or soldiers, no one to bar the way – it makes no sense – so small and vulnerable is he – a savior for them?!

They told Mary and Joseph the tale of the angels and the night. The song of glory, the song of peace and yearning. And they looked at the child and saw a dot – a starting point – a way to connect with Mary and Joseph, a way to connect heaven and earth, a way to connect animal and human – a way in the darkness and loneliness of their lives.

And Mary – the child's mother – pondered what she had been told. She too tried to connect the dots. The dot of the Angel who had appeared to her months ago – her understanding that she, young and powerless, mattered, to --that this child, so vulnerable and small was not just her child but God's – and not just God's child but a child for the world.

She pondered and tried to connect the dots and treasured the picture that was being revealed – Angels and Shepherd and soon to be wise men, oh my! But also as time goes on miracles and healings, a cross, and an empty tomb.

The baby whose birth we celebrate tonight is the starting place and the guide – the key if you will, to connecting the dots in the right order that we might see the big picture of what God is revealing to the world. When we get the dots in the right order – everything is connected: the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the secular and the religious, the outcast and the inner circle. Every dot matters, all dots are essential to the picture.

That is what the angels meant when they declared their message of peace – their message of wholeness and healing. In Jesus all the disparate dots of our lives are reconciled – the loneliness and the hurt give way to connection and compassion. Jealousy and envy give way to generosity and kindness. Enemies draw near, and forgiveness becomes real.

No wonder those angels were ecstatic with praise because only in God's love is such a thing possible. Only through God's love – this little baby Jesus – can the dots be connected. We are part of the picture that is being revealed. We can connect the dots of our world – we can find meaning to the larger picture we needn't be alone – wondering whether we matter – but we do need to start in the right place to get things in the right order. And that right place is in Bethlehem – where a child has been born for us! For us! A savior – a messiah who is Christ the Lord.