

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
Christmas Eve
Thursday, December 24, 2020**

As the psalmist wrote: Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the whole earth... Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the turn of the last millennium, a mere twenty years ago, the sociologist Robert Putnam published a book that revealed how American society was changing. In this book, called *Bowling Alone*, Putnam describes the decline of social capital in the United States since 1950 by pointing to the reduction in all the forms of in-person social intercourse upon which Americans used to found, educate, and enrich the fabric of their social lives. He used the metaphor of bowling to describe this increasingly socially isolated America. Although the number of people who bowled had increased in the past decades, the number of people who bowled in leagues had decreased. His argument being that if people bowl alone, they do not participate in social interaction and civic discussions that might occur in a league environment.

Across all types of civic and community engagement, Putnam noted an aggregate decline in membership of traditional civic organizations, supporting his thesis that U.S. social capital has declined. This, of course, has also been shown to be true in religious organizations as well. There have been oh so many books and articles written about the decline of the Church, especially in the mainline denominations.

If *Bowling Alone* is the metaphor for our late 20th and early 21st century American culture, it seems to have reached its apex (or perhaps its nadir) in 2020. This year of global pandemic, economic turmoil, ecological disaster, political and social unrest, and all-around anxiety and fear that has come from the upending of our expected daily patterns has brought us to what seems like the logical conclusion of bowling alone. This has been a year that has looked like educating alone, working alone, living alone (or with only the few folks in our household), worshipping alone, dining alone, shopping alone (or at least distanced and masked), and watching movies alone. It seems the most social of activities we engaged in this year are voting and protest – and even much of this was done virtually and alone from home.

Interestingly, this metaphor of *Bowling Alone* also seems to fit our nativity lesson this evening. Even in the first century, while women may not have labored in busy hospitals filled with medical experts, they did not labor alone. Surrounded by family and midwives, the women of the ancient world were accompanied in their work in bringing new life into the world. Childbirth was dangerous work then – as it still is even now. And while it certainly required the work of one, it often took the efforts of many to bring about a safe birth for both mother and child. But Luke's story suggests that Mary's labor might have been a more solitary endeavor that day so long ago. Perhaps it was much more like *Bowling Alone* than we'd like to think. Reflecting on the scene, I imagine a frightened young mother laboring with only her equally frightened and inexperienced fiancée and a few barn animals for support. I am quite sure this was not how Mary wanted this to go, nor was it what she would have likely expected after Gabriel's announcement that she would bear the Son of God.

And yet... there it is. While few other humans may have been present, all the angels of heaven were watching closely and gently guiding the events. Once again, God shows us that even when we feel that we are the most alone, we are not. Even when things don't go the way we expect, we are always more connected than we realize. This may be the greatest lesson lived and learned by us this year, as well.

And what a year this has been! 2020 has been a year of grief and anxiety, illness and death, political turmoil and civil unrest. A year in which it seems that everyone was angry, resentful, and taking up banners, signs, and flags of protest, taking to the streets and the internet to scream our discontent and fear.

2020 has also been a paradoxical year – and living in paradox is always unsettling. It’s been a year of extreme isolation, as well as extreme communal protest. A year when life came to a halt, while at the same time the world seemed to spin ever faster on its axis. A year of both nothing to do, as well as too much to pay attention to and too little time to process it all. It has been a year of both waiting for the storm to blow over, as well as the continual exhausting readjusting to the of-the-moment new normal.

While it seems that everything changed this year, I have found that the essential aspects remained the same. The pandemic has seemingly brought us to the logical conclusion of our social isolation... And yet... To our surprise, what we have found has been connection despite isolation; charity and love for others despite uncertainty and fear; increasing unity and community despite the erosion and disintegration of our societal scaffolding. So, while Putnam’s metaphor of *Bowling Alone* may symbolize previous decades, I propose a different metaphor for this time. Reflecting on this wild year, I suggest that *Singing Together Virtually* is the more appropriate symbol for this time.

I hope you paid attention to the Good Shepherd Senior Choir’s recorded anthems during the prelude. Who knew we could sing together virtually? That this group of singers – of various backgrounds and skillsets – would be able to overcome technical difficulties, personal fears, and the dislocation of isolation to find a way to sing together virtually is amazing and wondrous in my eyes. These anthems represent months of working individually with each chorister to procure and set up the proper technology to do this well. It represents figuring out how to do something that none of us knew how to do. And it represents a willingness on everyone’s part to feel silly, foolish, and ignorant, in order to create something wonderful.

These anthems are not individual recordings of each singer in isolation that is then mixed together, rather it is truly a choir singing together over the internet – and what a joyful noise it is! I am told that after the many weeks and months to set everyone up, the first time the choir was actually able to sing together brought tears to many eyes. For, you see, singing together is an act of creation, not merely an aggregate of parts, and as such it results in something greater and more wondrous. As an act of creation, it is also infused with the Holy Spirit – it is an incarnation, if you will.

The theological notion of the incarnation – of God made flesh - is important to our faith. It means that God understands the human condition, with its devastating difficulty and pain, as well as the ecstatic joyous beauty. Our God has never been merely detached from his creation, but comes among us and walks with us. The miracle and mystery of the incarnation lies in this radical act of unity and communion with his beloved creatures.

However, the blessing of the incarnation does not protect us from the dangers of our fragile and mortal lives today, any more than it did over 2,000 years ago on that lonely night in Bethlehem. On the night Jesus was born, it wasn’t that everything suddenly became safe or peaceful. The Roman Empire continued; war, disease, and poverty were not eliminated. “And yet,” as the Rev. Heidi Haverkamp writes, “a new door on the journey toward salvation was opened. God came to earth, to live and die as one of us and to teach us about a different kind of freedom – a freedom to love without fear of death, pain, or shame.”¹

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/endless-advent-luke-21-20-nativity-lord>

This freeing our love from fear does not free us from the realities of mortal life, but it does grant us the freedom to live and love fully within these lives. When we love freely – love God, love our neighbors, love ourselves – we live fully human lives, connected to each other and to God. That is the meaning of the incarnation to us now. This Christmas for us may be much like that evening 2,000 years ago – just a small household gathering and a few hangers on. But with the promise of Emmanuel – God with us – we realize that we are alone and yet so very connected. This year Christ will be born again in us – the perfect gift – in the midst of the uncertainty and brokenness that is these times.

And let us praise God for that! This Christmas, let us rejoice that the Lord has come, is coming, and will come again. Let us sing our thanksgivings that our God deigns to join us – us! – in our fragile and broken humanity this year and always. Let us receive this perfect gift of God’s indwelling fully into our hearts, minds, and bodies and live this perfect love in our lives. And let us share this love outrageously with each other and all our neighbors – in full recognition of just how connected we truly are. No longer Bowling Alone, this Christmas we realize that we have always been Singing Together, and the babe will come again despite everything. Not because of who we are but because of who God is.

So, this Christmas Eve I invite you to belt out the carols and hymns like never before. Sing with abandon, like you do when all alone in the shower! We may be separated from each other in our homes and living rooms this evening. Yet the greater truth revealed this year is that we are connected, even while isolated; we are gathered, even while separated; we are gifted the grace of God’s indwelling presence, even while experiencing great uncertainty. So, let us Sing Together over Livestream – knowing that we are so deeply connected to each other, virtually and through our bonds of love.

Amen.