

A number of years ago, some of you may recall, I shared with you all the story of my dog Alice's pedigree – or lack there of as the case may be. Though adopted from a shelter, I was sure that she was an American Dingo mix – a certainty that was bolstered by every vet and dog trainer who would exclaim upon seeing her, "Look, it's a dingo!" I secretly believed that not only was she surely pure dingo, but that she was a rare and unique dingo – an exception to her exceptional breed – and I held onto this belief steadfastly until one fateful day in November 2012.

I had run across an organization that works exclusively with American Dingos, also called Carolina Dogs, so I decided to send several pictures and a description of Alice's behavior and characteristics to this "specialist" for confirmation. When I received a reply email from this "specialist," I opened it full of expectation... only to be immediately crestfallen... It read, "Thanks for writing about your dog! I took a look at Alice, and while she's very unique and beautiful, I do not think she is a Carolina Dog. Whatever she is, I'm sure you love her very much!!"

Whatever she is? Whatever she is? How dare she say, "whatever she is"? All of the sudden, it was as though I had no idea who or what Alice was, and for a while after that I went on a wild search online to match her with some breed, any breed, until my searching for answers finally fell away, and I just let the wonder of the mystery of her settle in to my pondering heart, "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" That is the heart of the question as we enter into the mystery of the Christ child. Who is this child before us? It was a question inspired by Mary's pondering heart when the Angel Gabriel appeared to her to tell her that she would bear the son of the Most High, when Elizabeth called her "the mother of my Lord" in a prophetic outburst as her son John leapt in her womb, when the shepherds shared the angel's Good News of the birth of the savior, when the prophets Anna and Simeon hailed him as the Messiah, when the magi fell to their knees and worshiped him. Mary pondered all these things in her heart, seeking to fathom the mysteries of this child born of her own flesh and blood and yet born beyond her imaginings. Who are you? Who is this child that has so unexpectedly and quite disruptively graced our lives?

Like Mary we are meant to ponder who is this child to us that we might be open to what God wants to show us – reveal to us – from the intimate depths of God's very being. It's a question that invites to let go of all that we think we know about this child we celebrate, to let go of Jesus as the God of our making so that Jesus might truly be the Lord of our redeeming. It is a question that allows God be God in our lives. Who is this child that has come among us yet again?

This child is the one in whom the eternal promise of God, "I am with you!" incarnates and takes on human form. This child is the one in whom we are assured in startling fashion of God's love-drenched presence with us. This child is the one through whom the distortion and delusion of our separation, estrangement, alienation, and disconnection dissolves, and we are caught up in the current of the undifferentiated, undivided, unconditional love of the Most High. We all know that hope is sometimes and achingly small space, and into this space, God places God's very self, and a child is born, and God is with us!

It occurs to me that as we allow this this presence to break open our hearts in holy unexpected, disruptive, sometimes intrusive ways, we are confronted with yet another question. Not only "who are you, this child who has come among us?" but also "who am I?" "What kind of person does this presence in my life lead me, compel me, inspire me, provoke me to be?"

When greeted by the angel Gabriel, Mary had to decide whether she would be the type of person to risk everything and bear not only the promised child, but the scandal, the consequences, the complete and utter disruption of the life she thought she would live. Joseph had to decide if he was the type of man who would walk away from his fiancé, or bear whatever disgrace and uncertain future might come to him and to his family. A little later, the magi had to decide whether they would risk their lives to defy a ruthless ruler and protect a child.

Every single person in the Christmas story in some way shape or form might have begun with the question, "Who is this child who has come among us," but in asking that

question was confronted with another, “who am I, and what type of person does this holy presence call me to be?”

As I said a few moments ago, we all know in this day and age that hope is sometimes an achingly small space, and the world needs us to be the type of people who step into that space, who point to the Christ child, and proclaim in word and deed, God is with us! The world needs us to risk discomfort, disgrace, disdain, derision and the disruption of life as we know it to be the kind of people who bear God's love-drenched presence in the world without counting the costs.

When you meet the Christ child again this year, ask not only, “who are you?” and expect to be caught up in the current of the undifferentiated, undivided, unconditional love of the Most High, but ask also, “What type of person does your presence in my life lead me, compel me, inspire me, provoke me to be so that I may be part of sharing God's love-drenched presence in the world?”

I want to end with a litany composed by Howard Thurman, a theologian, educator and civil rights leader, called “Now the Work of Christmas Begins.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

Amen.