Thursday afternoon in a nursing home is pretty much like any other afternoon, unless you happened to be there last Thursday. About 1:30 in the afternoon, residents began gathering for the afternoon activity. Advertised as “Drumming with Connie,” it seemed something different and maybe interesting and so about 30 residents straggled in. They sat as they almost always do, in a large circle but, as usual, few people spoke to each other. Mostly they just sit and wait in silence, another diversion promised to help pass the time before dinner. They know their neighbors, know them all too well maybe, and there are no surprises there. It’s just another Thursday.

Then Connie came in. A short, rather round woman of middle age with long platinum blonde hair, she came in with a flatbed cart laden with drums. And she began unpacking. Tall drums that sat on the floor went to residents with 2 good hands. Smaller drums could be held between the knees and, for those paralyzed on one side by a stroke, she had drums that hung from the neck by a strap. She had drums of every size and description, a hammered silver drum from India and a hand-carved wooden drum from Egypt. There were drums covered in hairy cow skin and drums of smooth leather, wooden drums from Nigeria and painted drums from Haiti. And for those who couldn’t manage a drum, she had maracas, those gourds that are so easy to shake. And people perked up then, because it’s been a long time since someone handed them something unique and valuable and said, “Here, this is for you.” And eyes brightened and there was an air of anticipation in the room.

And then Connie sat down, with her own drum, and began to teach us what she knew. “It’s easy,” she said. “Let’s start with the sound of your own heart: lub, dub, lub, dub.” This is music we all know and so it was easy and everyone found they could make that sound with their drum. “Now,” she said, “while you play that I’ll add a note. But you must be sure to hold the beat, because we’ll come back to it again and again.” And the people played their heartbeats and she added a beat here and there and soon this incredible deep bass throbbing filled the place and we were drumming! And the amazing thing was that it was all perfect! When she got louder, all the drums got louder. And when she drummed soft as a whisper, everyone drummed softly. Every drum beat in a tempo passed from soul to soul, drawing on something primitive and sacred, the heartbeat of life pounded out in a place of darkness. And she knew just how to teach us because when it came time to end the song, she would count down: 4 – beat, beat, 3 – beat, beat, 2 – beat, beat, 1 – beat, beat, and everyone stopped -- and then broke out in joyous applause! She taught us so much. She taught us how to make the sound of the
wind in the trees by running our flat hands around the face of the drum. She taught us how to make the sound of the rain with our fluttering fingertips. And she continued for an hour, teaching songs from the Congo and Cuba and all sorts of faraway places in languages we didn’t understand, except that somehow we did understand them; we knew these songs somewhere deep inside and the drums translated for us. Songs at once simple and eternally complex, songs as natural as our own skin and as dear.

And a woman with Alzheimer’s, who sits most of her days in her room in silence, was shaking her maraca in time and grinning from ear to ear. And people with strokes were dancing in their wheelchairs and drumming out the rhythm and smiling for the pure joy of it. And even the deaf could hear this sound and it was a wonder. And the throbbing drumbeats filled the building and staff members wandered in and couldn’t help themselves — the activities director danced with the maintenance man and the head of housekeeping took the center of the circle to pound out a dance with a head nurse. And a man blind in one eye, who normally shuffles down the hall, took to the floor and gyrated in reckless abandon and there was music and it was heavenly!

And if you think this couldn’t possibly have anything to do with our lessons this morning, you are mistaken. Because our lessons are all about our search for the presence of God, about our yearning for something to lift us up and restore our souls. Listen to the drumbeat of Isaiah: The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom…Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. Or the psalm: The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.

But O, how hard it is for us to understand, that God works in ways wonderful and mysterious; that God will not be bound by our ideas of what is seemly and right for God to do. Like John the Baptist yearning for a militant messiah to set his people free and languishing in a prison of darkness and despair, we want God to set the world right according to our ideas. And God comes along with his drum and says, “Listen to the tune I’m playing and see if you can catch the beat.” And it isn’t about power and prestige (Jesus calls these soft robes). It’s about enabling the deaf to hear and the lame to walk. It’s about enabling the dead to rise and about good news for the poor. And it’s about accomplishing all those things with human flesh on.

This is what we are waiting for, when we stop for even a moment in our mad rush to Christmas to think about it. This is what that third candle, the pink one that symbolizes joy, is all about. It’s about God who dares to put on human flesh and come among us, so that we can share his heartbeat. It’s about Jesus, in all his frail humanity, disappointing all our grandiose plans with powerful songs of love and forgiveness and restoration.
If I had my way, no one would be in a nursing home. Everyone would be cared for in their own home by people who love them, people gifted with superhuman patience and unending endurance and courage. And no one would ever be lonely or afraid and no one would be sad and no one would die because I don’t like to say goodbye. But that is not the way of this poor flesh. We do get sick and we do have limits to our strength and we do die. There are lions out there and ravenous beasts and we are more than scared – yet through it all, God is there, drumming out his message of salvation: Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God…He will come and save you.

And sometimes, God comes in ways we couldn’t in all our dreaming imagine, using gifts we would never think of and, if we are very lucky, from our own prisons we hear the drumbeat and we know it is happening, this miracle of salvation. And if we are paying attention, we may glimpse Jesus even now, coming in to us and saying, “Let’s start with the sound of your own heart. Listen now and see if you can catch the beat.”

AMEN