

Christmas (Dec. 25, 2012)

For four weeks now we have been preparing to celebrate this blessed day. Through four Advent weeks we have been listening, reflecting, praying about the expectations of a people that walked in darkness. It was a time of hope, hope expressed in those magnificent messianic oracles of Isaiah, visions of universal peace when there would not only be no more war but not even preparation for war. Spears and swords, instruments of death and destruction, would be turned into plowshares and pruning hooks, farm tools that cultivate the fruits of the earth and give us life.

It was a time of promises yet to be fulfilled, a time of eager longing and expectation, a time of hope, that this *could* be a better world and the conviction that this *would* be a better world, that something great and wonderful would happen to let us know that God continues to be faithful, that God has not abandoned his people, and that God would break into our sad and sorrowful world with proof of a love beyond all expectation.

In our Liturgy today both Isaiah the prophet and Luke the evangelist are telling us that a new age has dawned. That God has in fact broken into our human history to save his people and to set things right. But Isaiah the prophet, for all the beauty, lyricism, and wonder-filled poetry of his vision never dreamed of just how that was going to happen: that the wonder-counselor, God-hero, Prince of Peace, would in fact be the Son of God, that the very Word of God would take on our flesh and blood and bone and become a human being like all of us, that the creator of all would become totally dependent upon his creatures. Like any baby, he will laugh and cry, he will nurse at his mother's breast, and he will soil his diapers. He will grow up advancing in wisdom and age and grace. Someday he will leave home to pursue the work his Father gave him to do and eventually he will die ignominiously on a cross.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is not only a beautiful story – indeed the most beautiful of all Christmas stories – it is also an extraordinary theological statement about who this child was and what he would mean not only to the people of his own day, but also to succeeding generations down to our time and into the future as well until he comes

again in glory. He had to be born in Bethlehem, not simply because the prophet Zephaniah had foretold it. Not even because of the census that Luke speaks of, but because he, like his legal father, Joseph, was of the house and family of David, and Bethlehem was David's city. For all the lowliness and poverty of his birth he will be the Davidic King so long awaited.

The first to hear about his birth were shepherds, poor people, looked down upon by others because, despite the importance of their occupation, it was one that violated the intricate regulations of ritual purity, and so they were excluded from the synagogues and from temple worship. A major theme of Luke's Gospel will be Jesus' mission to the poor and the outcasts. He was one of them. He would be rejected by his own. There was no room for them in the inn.

It's not Luke but Matthew who tells us that he is Emmanuel, God-with-us – and that of course sums up the whole thing very succinctly. But what does that mean? Is God still with us? Do we really believe that, especially as we worry about so many terrible things our world is facing: a serious financial crisis, homeless and hungry people. And all those thousands of people who have been killed or wounded or maimed for life in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Israel? To say nothing of the senseless tragedy that took place in Newtown, Conn., on December 14? Where was Emmanuel? Was God with them? And what difference does it make to us who celebrate his birth here today at Holy Trinity Church and who perhaps experience some anxiety about the future? How do we internalize the message of Christmas? How do we make it our own so that it fills our minds and hearts and sticks to our ribs and gives us something to hope for, something to live by?

Let me attempt an answer to those questions – my own answer, mind you, but it might help you as well.

First of all it is my firm belief, as I hope it is yours as well, that the mystery we celebrate today, the birth of Jesus, is not just a historic occurrence that happened once two thousand years ago. The Incarnation, the enfleshment of the Word of God, is a mystery that is still with us. How does this mystery become real in the lives of each and every one of us?

Listen to what St. Theresa of Avila has to say on the subject: Christ

has no body now but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.

It's Theresa's insight into the mystery of the Incarnation and how it continues in our lives today. After all, as St. Paul so strongly insisted, we are the Body of Christ. Since that is so, then, it is in and through us that the Incarnation remains actual, that the presence of Christ is manifested in our world today.

The mystery of the Incarnation cannot be captured in a few words – or in any number of words. (As someone has said, if we were meant to understand God in the abstract, Mary would not have had a baby, she would have written a book.) But suffice it to say that at this Christmas, when so many fear for the world, it is good for Christians to remember that the one who asks us to care for his world is also the one who made the world and the one who joins us in the world.

And so, as we who are the faithful come this blessed day to Bethlehem, we come joyful and modestly triumphant to behold not only the King of Angels, but also ourselves because ever since God took on our human nature, we now share in God's own nature. There is in each and every one of us at least a spark of the divine. How do we best celebrate the birth of Jesus? By accepting so great a gift, by letting that spark shine, by using our heads and hands and hearts to show the world the compassion that was born two thousand years ago but is still with us. Jesus is still Emmanuel. In spite of everything God is still with us.

May the peace, the joy, the love, the wonder that this day celebrates be yours today and every day of your lives. Amen.