

Christmas Day 2023 (Zoom Morning Prayer with the congregation of St. Mary's Church, Northfield)

Merry Christmas! It almost seems nostalgic, a sort of traditional Christmas service, to meet like this on Zoom! We did so many of these services during the Pandemic, that now it feels a little bit traditional to go back to the old days, and to worship entirely on Zoom! Alright, putting my facetiousness aside, it is still good that we can come together in this fashion this morning to celebrate Christmas Day as most of us spent the better part of yesterday in church! So, Merry Christmas as we pray together on Zoom.

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, this morning we hear of your Word coming into the world, to bring a light shining in the darkness. May your Word made flesh reveal to us your glory this day and strengthen our faith in the days to come. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Christmas Eve is always such a special celebration for us: we gather together in the dark, to hear the familiar words of Luke's gospel, we sing the lovely carol "Silent Night" and in candlelight ponder the miracle of the birth of Jesus and the angelic proclamation of "Peace on earth and goodwill to all." But now the day has dawned, shepherds and angels nowhere to be found...and for most, that's fine, they have moved on to the rituals of gift giving and family meals, gathering with friends, or simply relaxing and taking a break on this holiday Monday morning. But you and me, we've come together once more, virtually at least!, to continue to ponder the birth of a savior for us. It is our faith that leads us here this morning: no matter how small and weak or strong it might be, our faith that brings us here to once again consider the the savior's birth for us. And of course, we also get the added bonus of being able to sing some of the great Christmas carols again, too, even if we have to do that virtually as well!

This morning we leave Luke's stable and manger, shepherds and angels, and we hear John's stunning account of what transpires at Jesus' birth. Where Luke pinpoints the moment in history, John has a cosmic vision, summing up all that is and ever will be in the grand opening of his Gospel story, "In the beginning...." echoing Genesis and the Hebrew Scriptures, but now laser focused on the Word of God, bringing all into being, bringing life and above all light, light for all people, a light the shines in the darkness and is not overwhelmed or extinguished by the bleakness...and then, deeper and deeper: this Word, this true light, this divine utterance becomes flesh and dwells among us. Our heads should

almost be spinning: what is John trying to tell us? The Word becomes flesh and encamps with us, lives with us, occupies our space? What???

I taught at Sing Sing, a maximum security prison, upstate in the mid Hudson Valley of New York for eight years. I taught a year long college level course in Church History to 25 inmates, studying the History of Christian thought from the earliest origins until the modern period. One of the doctrines we would learn about is the Incarnation. Now, given our social inequalities in our nation, the vast majority of my students were African American and Latino, and given the inequalities of our educational system, sometimes I had to break things down to help the students understand. For example, with the doctrine of Incarnation, I'd ask them, "So what is in the middle of 'Incarnation.'? What does 'carne' mean?" And the Latino students would immediately answer, "Meat!" I'd say, "Yes, like chili con carne, chili with meat." And all the students would nod their heads in agreement: and that's the Incarnation: God made meat, the divine Word made flesh, God's love completely manifest in human life, God's love embodied in a savior, God's creative, life-giving, light-bearing, loving Word made fully human in Jesus the Christ, the anointed one of God.

That child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, adored by Mary and Joseph, worshipped by shepherds, is not just some cute baby: this child is the full promise of God's love come into our lives. While chaos and darkness swirl about us: wars of unimaginable horror, raging in Sudan, Ukraine and most tragically the Holy Land, so that Christmas cannot even be celebrated in Bethlehem this year, instead the Lutheran pastor of the Christmas Church the Rev. Munther Isaac told a reporter, "God is under the rubble in Gaza, this is where we find God right now." And perhaps closer to home, a climate crisis that threatens our lives, as we saw in the flooding in Central Vermont last summer; and issues of economic uncertainty, growing numbers of homeless, and even health issues (remember, I did begin this sermon speaking about the Pandemic, and nowadays one can't help but wonder if another might be in the offing), so yes, there is a bleakness and uncertainty and chaos in the background every day for us. Today, this Christmas Day, today we recall in faith that the very love of God, that almighty power at the very depth of the cosmos, that love of God still shines out in the darkness, still shines not to be overcome by the darkness and that very love has entered human life, becoming flesh and living with us, embodying a divine resistance to the powers of death and hell. This is John's vision, what truth John proclaims to you and to me today, the Good News of the savior brought into our life, brought into the world that we might know the glory of God and the grace

and truth God so freely bestows on us. This Word of love made human is the deepest of all gifts this Christmas, a gift that frees us to live our lives in the depth of that love, freeing us to be the people of God, liberating you and me from our captivity, loving us into freedom, or as John says elsewhere in his gospel, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." That, that my beloved friends in Christ, is the joy we celebrate this day, the gift given to us so graciously by God, that Jesus is the word of love come into our lives and our world, giving us the hope of God's salvation, granting us God's mercy and calling us to live for others as he lives for us. This great love, this gracious gift, is our Christmas joy this day. Thanks be to God for this amazing grace and thanks be to Christ for leading us in the way of love. Amen and Merry Christmas!