

A Sermon for Christmas Eve 2014 A Sermon for Christmas Eve 2013
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Merry Christmas! Whether you are one of those people who has used your Advent season of preparation wisely, and all is calm and all is bright at your house: everything wrapped, mailed, decked and baked; or whether like me you will leave this place to a few more hours of batteries, gift wrap, allen wrenches and scotch tape, take a deep breath, set aside what's done and left undone, and lose yourself in song and story for a while.

The story that draws us together tonight is both familiar and strange – a baby is born, as happens so often, as happened to each of us – born in humble, uncomfortable circumstance to be sure, but still not an unlikely event, not at all unheard of. But beyond all the stars and signs and portents, shepherd and angels and wise visitors from far off lands with eerily symbolic gifts, what truly makes this story strange is the child himself, about whom we make the strangest claim:

Word made flesh! God incarnate! You know those advertisements you see this time of year that tout this or that thing as “the perfect gift for everyone on your list?” Well God's gift list is longer than anybody's, and yet God hit on the one gift that really was perfect for everyone on that list: God's own self.

When Moses asked God who he should tell the Israelites had brought them out of Egypt and called them into a new way of life, God told Moses, “Tell them I AM.” But now, with the birth in a stable of a baby who will call us all into a newer way of life, God says, “Tell everyone “I AM WITH YOU.” The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Emmanuel. God with us. The perfect Christmas present! Just what we wanted. It fits like it was made for us. And wrapped so beautifully in swaddling clothes. In a manger. In a stable. In a story.

We hear a lot in the news this time of year about the so-called war on Christmas. And in response, somehow, kindly phrases get taken as insults, attempts to keep civil and religious life separate are labeled oppression, using “Xmas,” an ancient Christian abbreviation, is quite incorrectly seen as a secular insult, and lots of people who ought to be jolly are just plain grumpy.

But if there is any war on Christmas in our country, it’s pretty clear that Christmas is winning. A Pew Research survey published last year showed that ninety percent of Americans celebrate Christmas, far more than claim any religious affiliation. Fully a quarter of those who do celebrate Christmas don’t even know that it has any religious significance at all.

And another form of seasonal religious grumpiness is about precisely that – that Christmas has lost its religious meaning and become a consumerist mish-mash of borrowed traditions and Madison Avenue hype.

But as for me, I'm not grumpy about any of it, except the focus on getting rather than giving. I do fear that tomorrow morning, for many of our families, will resemble the joy that Isaiah said was "as people exult when dividing plunder." But I'm all for secular Christmas. I love the lights and decorations, the parties and feasts and especially the music. "Jingle Bells" and "White Christmas" and "Let it Snow" and all those songs that can't be escaped if you step out of doors this time of year but that you won't hear in church quite simply delight me.

And think about it – if you take all of those secular Christmas traditions – making our homes as beautiful as possible, and welcoming family, friends and strangers; overloading our tables and our cups with delicious things to eat and drink, boldly defying the darkness of winter with lights and candles; thinking not only of what others need, but what will truly delight them; being generous with our time and our money to help strangers in need; and, miraculously, singing together with words and tunes we all know at least well enough to join the chorus – this blessed season of hospitality, when you look at it that way, sounds an awful lot like the reign of

God as Jesus describes it. A house with many mansions. A banquet table open to all. Every voice joined in song. A tree that shelters many. A light in the darkness. These are all images of the reign of God that we get from scripture. And that we experience at this time of year, in sometimes overwhelming beauty, a life that resembles this life of joy and grace and beauty that God intends for us, is yet another Christmas miracle. The real spirit of Christmas, you see: the promise and reality that God is with us in body and spirit, in our joys and sorrows, our community and our solitude – has such power and grace that it manages to transform the secular world, and remake even it in the image of God’s beauty, God’s love, God’s hospitality, God’s light.

And when we hear that seemingly profane and selfish wish of childhood, that it could be Christmas all year long, remember that it too is an echo of our deepest desire – that the reign of God may be accomplished, (thy kingdom come, we say in the prayer) and that all our lives might be rich in beauty and hospitality, feasting and merrymaking, light and song. And by the grace of God, Christmas brings a taste of that to all – to delight our hearts, knit up our friendships, and to make even those who haven’t yet heard of it yearn for the reign of God.

Amen.