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24th December 2011
Christmas Eve II

What happened that night over two thousand years ago is really quite remarkable: God came to earth. It should terrify us, fill us with fear! The incomprehensibility of God wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying vulnerable, in a trough for feeding animals. The awesome majesty of the King of Kings, already told by the innkeeper, "We have no room for you." The one who is shown only the barest of hospitality — a barn, a manger, some rags — will become the gracious host to the poor, those living on the edge, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, humble fishermen, and you

and me.

We see the world differently because of Jesus; we journey with companions. The God who came to be with us opens our eyes: We see the poor. We are with them. We hear the screams of war-torn villages. We are with them. We suffer with the sick and the dying. *With* them. Jesus wants us to see them as we see him. How do we see him tonight? With love, wonder, tenderness and admiration. He wants us to see prostitutes this way. He wants us to see homeless people this way. He wants us to see soldiers this way. He wants us to see each other this way.

It's supposed to be a merry time, Christmas. Yet you and I know that for many -- including

some among our community -- it is anything but merry. One among us is still in jail, not really knowing what is going on in his community except what he hears in the brief moments of a visit. A family finds the holiday unbearable without their daughter and sister. A man can hardly face Christmas without his wife. A woman -- several of them, actually -- ache for their husbands. Christmas alone, never leaving grief behind, but always deeply loving us, caring for us. Someone who remembers Christmases past with a hundred friends dying, a parish church decimated by a third. A family is reminded of the emptiness of a house with fewer children. What do we say to them? Do we wish them "Merry Christmas?" Or do we grieve for them and with them; do we have the courageous

grace to be Christ with them; can we simply say, as God has said, I love you?

An infant lying in a manger, helpless without his mother, a sign for us that God needs *our* help to prepare the way, that God is not a master puppeteer who will provide an instant fix to the problems of the world, that God created us — and God saw that it was good.

Something has gone terribly wrong in this world, our fragile island home, and God has come in the manner of Jesus Christ to show us the way to turn it right. The God of salvation, the God of Abraham and Isaac, of Sarah and Rebekah, the God of you and of me, El-Shaddai, God has come to earth to save us from our selves. Jesus. Emmanu-el.

With us.

It is a night of sweet wonder. A night of tears, a night of laughter, of music that carries us back to our childhoods and forward to our futures. The smell of evergreens, the flickering light of candles, the story of Mary and Joseph and the baby and the shepherds.

The mystery of the Incarnation of God is a powerful sign that

We

Are

Loved.

Mary. Pregnant before marriage. By the laws of Leviticus she should be stoned to death. And when she says, “Be it unto me according to your word,” she is agreeing to that very possibility. Joseph. Totally perplexed, for the Bible tells us that he knew he wasn’t the father. We suspect he had no question whether Mary had slept with another man; but whose child is it, anyway? The shepherds, the lowest of the low, are hallucinating. The Magi are following a star no one else can see. The people in the Inn are fearful: what will the census mean? Will Rome's power ever rest easy over them? The Pax Romana is a wall around the entire empire, one that guards, slaughters, and attacks the dark outside.

The Gospel of Luke tells us a lot about poverty - poverty of spirit, financial poverty, poverty of imagination. And true to the rest of the Gospel, the angels appear first to the shepherds, saying "Fear not!" Now shepherds were looked down upon, almost untouchables, even though the settlers around them depended on the flocks for food, milk, and wool for spinning and weaving. Unlettered and unwashed, they were far from the center of power. But the angels came to them first, not to Herod, reminding us of God's great love for the marginalized and the poor. "Peace on earth," they sang. Jesus has come to the lowly and meek. God's glory shown around them, revealing God's mercy toward his people.

Two thousand years later, we hear the story and are invited by God to humbly adore him, to extend God's compassion with our hands and our hearts.

As your priest and pastor I am called to a very strange position indeed. And trust me: I would not have it any other way. It is a beautiful vocation, sometimes not a happy one, but always joyous. I could never carry on without this congregation. You. But the challenges of the holidays beg me -- and us -- to walk carefully among the broken, the fearful, the sorrowful.

I'm not saying that we should find no great pleasure in Christmas. Far from it. The utter *strangeness* of God come to earth is

powerful, moving, an explosive moment in history. And the love shown by that mystery inspires wonder, excitement, an awe-struck, gob-smacked joy!

But we need to remember the deep meaning of the story: That the coming-to-earth of God in Christ Jesus is our source of mercy, of compassion, of love. We bring the brokenness of the world to the manger, to the heart of Jesus, and lay it down there. Our grief, our fear -- we take them to the manger, to the heart of Jesus. Our sinful side - you know, that dark side of us -- we take that to the manger, too, straight to the heart of Jesus. Before this baby, we are all as wonderstruck as children discovering the world for the first time.

And we are surrounded by the glory of God.

When we temper the out-and-out joy of Christmas with a gracious dose of compassion we understand how important it all is, how deeply touching and how profoundly transformational this event can be.

Because God changed the world and God changes us. God, loving us, wants us to experience some of the particular grace of being God. God wants us to heal, to feed, to clothe, to forgive.

This time of year is fraught with traditions and expectations. We've just had a winter solstice and, if you can believe it, the days are now

getting longer than they were up until Wednesday. Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, Santa Claus, decorating, gift-buying, shopping, shopping, shopping, cookies without end (and I personally love cookies), Alvin and the Chipmunks -- it's a cultural frenzy of crazy happy. Yet even yesterday, the people standing in line at Starbuck's were just plain grouchy. And I imagine that it's all those expectations and deadlines, the economy, and maybe one too many holiday party, or one too many "Little Drummer Boy." Or maybe a relative is sick. Or a brother has been sent to Afghanistan. Or friends are getting a divorce.

We must walk carefully. In love. In community. In understanding that as a community we will share not only happy times, but our heartbreak, our failures, our anger, our frustration, our affection, our laughter.

Christians approach the manger with the shepherds. Before us is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He will tell us to love our enemy, feed our poor, visit our prisoners, and cry for peace. Slowly, we learn; we return to the manger each year, perhaps a bit more gentle, perhaps a bit more broken, perhaps a bit more reflective and compassionate than the year before. We practice this week by week, learning to heal each other, to love each other, and now and then we have

glimpses of the wonder of our affection for each other, for the beauty of a hymn, for a moment of real spirit touching us and making us all one as we are given grace in the bread and wine.

Whoever we are, broken or healing, wherever we are on our spiritual journey, faithful or full of doubt, we must approach the manger, the heart of Jesus, with awe. Because the mystery who lies there is so full of surprises and challenges yet so full of love that we should be struck dumb. Maybe that's why it's such a challenge to me. Perhaps a Zen master, sitting in silence, could do a better job of explaining all this which none of us understand.

The divine mystery invites us into a foolish faith in God, telling us over and over that the kingdom is now. We just need to act like it.

This splendid night—it's impossible, even if we don't know what it's all about, not to feel it in our hearts.

Merry Christmas, everyone.