

Sermon for The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord  
Christ Episcopal Church, Middletown, New Jersey  
December 24<sup>th</sup> and December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
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O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

We should be emotional when we celebrate The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord. Emotion is appropriate when we are confronted by our experience of the Incarnation. If it's too soon in this sermon for you to accept an emotional response tonight (today) then let me give you a theological construct: Tonight (Today) we remember just how close God is in the word "immanence" while we can hardly comprehend God using the word "transcendence." These two strong yet feeble words reveal just how intimate we can be with God, and how distant God often seems. One word encompasses immanence and transcendence: LOVE.

So no matter how hard I try to stay in my head on this Christmas Eve (Day) I am confronted by emotion as I revel in the love that made the Incarnation a reality. This is the night (day) that the Prophet Isaiah foretold: *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

This is the night (day) we hear the Apostle Paul in the Letter to Titus remind us *The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.* The grace of God, the love of God, bringing salvation to all in the most unlikely and yet appropriate of places as proclaimed in the Gospel according to Luke: *The time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.* The prologue to the Gospel according to John claims this love in these words: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Intimacy is offered in the incarnation. The shepherds in Luke's Gospel experienced such intimacy as they lived into an expression I like to use: May the blessing of God find you when you least expect it and need it most. These lowest of the low, the roughest of the

rough, were invited by God's messenger the angel of the Lord: *"Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."*

May the blessing of God find you when you least expect it and need it most. This is what this night (day) is all about. Something you and I don't deserve nor earned happened. God breaks through the ease by which we keep distant and reminds us that God's love is all-encompassing and always close, no matter how hard we try to push against receiving that love. What joy it is to find a blessing when we least expect it and need it most!

Our confusion in clearly seeing the blessings God is continually offering is heightened during the commercial season of Christmas. The business of Christmas can overwhelm even the most disciplined practitioner of Advent. In the next few days, dry Christmas trees will leave homes. Santa Claus will be a simple memory of paper, candy, and parties. The dreary grey of the weight of the world will attempt to diminish the joy of the twelve days of Christmas.

By your presence tonight (today) you combat the pull of the world by choosing to worship the one whose authority, as Isaiah goes on in his prophecy, *"shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom."* You choose, by your presence, to enter into the love made known in the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Christ to be, as Paul writes to Titus, *a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.* Perhaps just accepting God's holy invitation to be here in this worshipping community is the blessing of God you least expected and needed most.

I said earlier that we should be emotional when we celebrate The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord. How else can we find a place with shepherds as we encounter with awe and wonder the immanent and transcendent love of God made known to us in Jesus the Christ. I would like to share a story of a blessing my family and I received when we least expected it and needed most. This is a story that happened the weekend before Christmas 31 years ago during my first year in seminary.

I was allowed to enter Nashotah House, an Episcopal seminary just outside Milwaukee, Wisconsin on a provisional basis in the fall of 1986. Some of you know that I received a call to the priesthood just five months previous. With an openness to “Yes Lord, anything you want us to do, anyplace you want us to go” Edna Marie and I moved to Oconomoc, Wisconsin without formal acceptance from the seminary but with tacit permission from my bishop pending the results of the psychological examination. Permission arrived the day before classes began. However, the delay meant living in expensive off-campus housing that quickly depleted our savings.

We found welcome at Zion Episcopal Church, Oconomoc in the form of a loving congregation and deeply spiritual priest named Patrick Douthitt. As I was trying to understand the change from radio station general manager to my formation as priest, Father Pat became mentor and friend. Melinda was in first grade, and Adam turned four shortly after Christmas. Edna Marie worked a number of jobs and found support at Zion as well as with the seminary spouse community.

Before I go any further, I want to remind you that Santa Claus can and should be a messenger from God just as the angel was a messenger for the shepherds. The puppets I use to connect Santa Claus with St. Nicholas will suffice. While it looks as if there is but one puppet, there are really two. In the fourth century, St. Nicholas was Bishop of Myra and rescued the daughters of a family from dire poverty that could have led to their sale into slavery. St. Nicholas is remembered for the gold that found its way into stockings that were hung on the mantle to dry. This gold became a dowry for the daughters who were then able to marry. St. Nicholas was the messenger, the agent of God, who brought a blessing when it was least expected and needed most.

As Christmas approached that first year in seminary, we were out of money. The doorbell rang. Santa Claus stood on the steps and thrust an envelope in my hand. Santa then *“turned with a jerk, and laying his finger aside his nose, and giving a nod, up the chimney he rose.”* Okay, no chimney. But he did go quickly down the street saying, “Happy Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night!”

The envelope had ten one hundred dollar bills.

We didn't know that Father Pat was Santa for over year. What we did know was the blessing of God found us when we least expected it and needed it most.

Take a moment to at look at crèche before the altar. Find your place with shepherds. Let these words that we will soon pray within the Great Thanksgiving flow over and through you: *It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and every-where to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Because you gave Jesus Christ, your only Son, to be born for us; who, by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, was made perfect Man of the flesh of the Virgin Mary his mother; so that we might be delivered from the bondage of sin, and receive power to become your children.*

May the blessing of God find you when you least expect it and need it most. "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night!"

All these words I offer in the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen