

“Christmas Eve 2007”
Monday, December 24, 2007

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Well my friends, we’re finally here!

The Creche is full -- Jesus, Mary and Joseph have finally made it from Bethlehem to Southfield -- their porcelain images anyway -- the final 30 yards up the hard tile floor carried by precocious pre-schoolers during the 5 o’clock children’s service -- being the most perilous part of their journey...

The Christmas trees look absolutely gorgeous -- Our Poinsettias sing out in celebration -- Finally, the “dies natalis Christi” -- The Feast of the Nativity -- is here!

And you and I join the Shepherds in their midnight song declaring -- ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven!’

Unless, of course, we’ve been cooking all day -- or we’ve been shopping all day -- or wrapping all day -- in which case we’re more like Mother Mary in the Maternity Ward declaring -- “Phew, glad that’s over.”

Indeed, for Episcopalians, or any Christians who keep to a liturgical calendar -- we’re saying goodbye, most recently, to four weeks of Advent -- goodbye to four weeks of schizophrenia!

Yes, we’ve have had to live double-lives -- The last four weeks we’ve been going to holiday parties, shopping malls and keeping up with the season “out there”-

And then on Sundays, we come in here -- to a dimly lit sanctuary, -- to pensive and reflective music, not one of them a Christmas Carol -- and to a liturgy that asks us to step back and pause and prepare --

Well now, we have prepared. --

And now the night has come -- and we welcome with great pomp and circumstance -- Our King -- Our Lord -- Our Savior -- and in resplendent glory--

-out rolls the red carpet -- in come the heralds -- and who’s that walking on the red carpet?? -- or are they crawling? -- Is it a baby?

And if we thought Advent was an upside-down holiday -- how about this one?

You and I are declaring with great audacity, temerity and chutzpah -- that all the kings of the world -- all the pharaohs, generals, dictators and presidents that the this earth has ever known -- have never, and will never, be able to trump the rule and reign of this little baby -- Yes, it is a boy --

A vulnerable and defenseless little baby boy -- Born in some backwater municipality -- some 1,400 miles from Rome -- not celebrated by the well-connected, but by coarse shepherds.

For this baby grew up in absolute poverty -- never owned much of anything -- never commanded an army -- or even wrote a book -- could Jesus even write?

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And yet He changed the world more than any person who’s ever trod any of the dusty roads that wind and entwine our island home -- the third planet from the sun.

Oh sure -- God tried to get to know us on other terms -- God came to us as a great creator of a lush and luxuriant garden -- God came to us as a great flooder of the earth -
- God came to us as a great parter of the sea --

As the witty skeptic and essayist Shalom Auslander puts it -- in one of my favorite paragraphs of 2007:

“When I was a child my parents and teachers told me about a man who was very strong. -- “They told me he could destroy the world.” -- “They told me he could lift mountains. -- “They told me he could part the sea.

[They told me] “It was important to keep the Man happy.” -- “When we obeyed what the man had commanded, the man liked us. -- “When we didn’t obey what he had commanded, he didn’t like us” -- “He hated us.

“Some days he hated us so much that he killed us.-- “Other days, he let other people kill us. -- “We call these days ‘holidays.’

“On Purim we remember how the Persians tried to kill us. -- “On Passover we remember how the Egyptians tried to kill us. -- “On Hanukkah we remember how the Greeks tried to kill us.

“Blessed is He we prayed.”

And so it goes, God’s fruitless odyssey with humanity -- that turned all of us into, on our very best days -- fair-weather fans -- who, at the end of the day -- just didn’t want any part of God -- No surprise there!

“Hmmm,” God must have thought -- “Why won’t they come near me?” -- “What could I possibly do to improve my image?”

So, after multiple rounds of Botox -- two seasons on ‘Extreme Makeover’ -- And way too much time and money on e-harmony dot-com --

God finally said, “Aha!”-- “Here’s how I can get them to embrace me!”

And the next thing we knew, the Word of the Lord was this: Goo-goo, Gaa-gaa.

What a brilliant plan! -- for who can resist drawing near to a baby?

“I will force humanity to imitate the love that I have for them” -- God so cleverly reasoned -- For just as you and I lavish our adoration upon tiny, fragile infants -- who have absolutely no way of re-paying our kindnesses -- [not that we would ever ask for it] -- So too does God’s kindness come unto us -- abundant, overwhelming, and totally free of charge.

God expects nothing from us other than to rest in God’s arms and accept the love and adoration God so generously pours out upon each one of us.

You see, there are just some things you can’t teach from a distance -- some jobs that can’t be left to prophets and priests --

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And expressing God's boundless love to the universe is, sometimes, something you gotta just go down and do for yourself.

One night a little girl went to bed in her room -- And moments after her mother had read her a bedtime story and turned out the lights -- the little girl came knocking on her parent's door-

"I can't sleep -- I'm afraid there's a monster under my bed!"

"Oh dear!" said Mom -

"Well, remember when we said our prayers a little while ago?"

"Yes," said the little girl -

"And we asked God to be right beside you all the time!"

"Yes," said the little girl.

"Don't you believe God is in your room with you?"

After pausing a bit the little girl said -- "Sure Mom, but I need a God with skin."

We all need a God with skin -- which is what the Incarnation is all about.

This unbelievable act -- that Christians have always found as essential to understanding God's true nature -- a nature that tells us God loves us so much God will become, quite literally, our blood brothers and sisters.

It's an unbelievable act that "the world" has thought of as simply, quite batty -- though, we'll put up with it because we care about the December economy.

For, as we all know, God's very nature is one of unbounded love for you and me.

And perhaps the greatest gift we can ever get at Christmas is to do the best we can to contemplate this gift -- to spend some time reflecting on this great love.

It is an endless love that tells us that Jesus accepts us.

In our deeply flawed and faulty humanity God says "Yes!" to you and me.

The message of Christmas is that simple. -- We are accepted.

We are accepted by that which is greater than us -- by a name which we can never understand.

And tonight, we do not need to ask that name --

Tonight, we do not try to impress that name.

Tonight, we do not seek that name -- it seeks us. -- It has come down to us.

So we do not perform -- We do not achieve -- We only do one thing:

Tonight, we simply accept the fact that we are accepted.

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No matter where we are on our spiritual journeys -- no matter what we have done, no matter who we have been, no matter how we have hurt -- if the baby in the manger communicates anything to us -- it's approachability -- accessibility --

So, humor me if you will, and those of you who would like, please close your eyes -- and envision a little baby --

It's a little baby who is being held out to you -- and you stretch out your arms -- go ahead, stretch out your arms -- and reach for this baby-

Watch as this baby is being placed into your arms -- don't be afraid to smile as His eyes meet yours -- don't be afraid to caress His pudgy hands and support his sausage thighs -- Take this baby -- This cuddly and cooing little baby --

For this is the innocence in which God comes to us this day -- accessibility and vulnerability in human guise -- Go ahead and stroke the baby's hair -- Let him reach for your nose -- Let the twinkle in his eyes bring a smile across our faces-

It's OK, to take the baby -- it's ok to cuddle with the baby -- for the baby simply wants to be held -- by any and all who would come -- and bow down and believe -- this is our inheritance -- God incarnate, who wants, so much, to be held by us that He came in the form of one who would be so adored, so loved.

Now as we put the baby down -- and open our eyes and look around us -- we are also reminded of the not-so-fulfilling aspects of parenthood -- the midnight crying, the temper tantrums and the strange and pungent smells --

For just as humanity is flawed -- look around us, so is all of human life.

Yes, no matter how hard we try, we are surrounded by imperfection -- we are surrounded by people who make “taking the baby” a very difficult thing for us to do.

So my friends, let me take this opportunity on Christmas Eve to say: I am sorry.

Many of us who only come to St. David's on Christmas and Easter do so for good reason --

Many of us can only muster the strength or desire to do so because we have been hurt by the Church -- Maybe it's a position the Episcopal Church has taken -- maybe it's a parishioner who has hurt you, or offended you, or made you mad.

Maybe it's a clergy person who, consciously or unconsciously, made it very difficult for us to “take the baby.”

As the new rector of St. David's I apologize.

I want you to know that if I have done something -- or the Church has done something to hurt you -- we're sorry -

As we all know, the Church is not a museum for saints -- it's a hospital for sinners -- and living together is hard, hard work.

As you may know, this is my first job as a rector -- and I am far from perfect -- and we need all of our help in our shared endeavor to make St. David's all that we want it to be.

So, on behalf of myself, the staff and the parish -- not just an apology, but an invitation.

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Please join us – or re-join us.

We are not perfect -- But we are convinced that God has called us together -- There is synergy here -- We are always much better together than the sum of our individual parts.

For, the truth of the matter is, that God has called us together because God has some amazing work ahead of us.

As you leave tonight, we will be handing out this -- it's the “St. David's Quarterly” -

It outlines the worship services, adult forums, and outreach activities that we will be participating in, as a congregation, for the next 6 months.

Please take one – And please feel free to join us in our shared mission to be all who this little baby in the manger is calling us to be.

For on Christmas, if the incarnation spurs anything, it's imitation.

Jesus came down to this fragile and imperfect place to do something -- If Jesus is willing to get his hands dirty trying to fix this broken world -- shouldn't we?

At dinner with some Jewish friends the other night we started talking about Christmas traditions.

And for Jews, Christmas in America is an awkward time -- Christmas simply overwhelms the culture -

So as a Jew, do you ignore it, do you protest it...

Do you promote Hanukah -- which is a minor Jewish holiday that doesn't hold a candle - or even 7 candles to Christmas -- Ask any Jew, they'll tell you Dradle is no match to a Play Station II –

So an increasingly popular way many Jews are dealing with a world that celebrates a holiday that they don't -- is to smother it with love.

For many Jews, like our friends at dinner -- have turned it into a Mitzvah season.

Volunteerism among Jews at Christmas is a big thing -- Tens of thousands have become invested in Christmas by doing good deeds -- Volunteering at soup kitchens, visiting the homebound, buying Christmas presents for the poor -- maybe even filling in for you at work tomorrow -- although that might not work out too well with my job...

Harvey Katz, a lawyer from Glastonbury, Connecticut has paid it forward for decades by dressing up as Santa at the local bank.

My friends here in Huntington Woods are adopting a family -- buying food, clothes and toys for the adults and kids -- which, as someone in this congregation who does the same thing reminded me -

“If it's Jesus' birthday, shouldn't He be the one getting the presents?”

And if the human face of Jesus is found in the poor -- we've just found a place to deliver the birthday cake!

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For this idea of setting aright a world that is seriously off-kilter is not an endeavor that mysteriously appeared when Jesus was born in Bethlehem-

It is something God has been trying to do from the start-

The Jewish concept, in the Hebrew is: “Tikkun Olam” -- and it simply means: “Repairing the World.”

For that is why Jesus came in the first place.

And that is why you and I look to this manger not with sappy sentimentalism -- but with hope and optimism for what God is up to in 2008 at St. David’s.

We look with eyes wide open not just for birth, but for rebirth -- God is doing something magical and mysterious and wonderful in our midst -- it will take us outside of ourselves -- and into a broken world that is calling our name –

What better reason do we have to sing Joy to the World, the Lord has Come –

Let earth receive her king!

Amen.

Lessons:

Revised Common Lectionary I,
Isaiah 9:2-7,
Titus 2:11-14,
Psalm 96,
Luke 2:1-14