

Sermon at St.Mary's Church, Hamilton Village
The Feast of the Nativity, Christmas
December 25, 1999
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"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined."

Isaiah 9:2

"For great is the Holy One, and greatly to be praised;
The Holy One is more to be feared than all the gods
Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea thunder
And all that is in it;
let the field be joyful and all that is therein.
Then shall all the trees of the wood
Shout for joy before the Holy One
When our God comes,
When our God comes to judge the earth."

Psalm 96:4, 11-12

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all...while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

Titus 2:11,14

"Then an angel of God stood before them, and the glory of God shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "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 Messiah, the Holy One." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, " Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

Luke 2: 9-11

Out there on the streets of University City and West Philadelphia, it's very cold, and even with the light of a huge almost full solstice moon, people are struggling in darkness and cold just to survive the night. Some are trapped and enslaved by addictions that rob them and often those they love of spirit and, too often, life. Some struggle with mental illness; mania, depression, schizophrenia are their companions in the cold darkness, sometimes closer to their spirits than any compassion, any love. Others must cope to stay warm because they are poor and their children must, above all, be warm and fed. They constantly battle to keep their kids healthy, and hope and struggle so that some shred of the Christmas around them will creep into their chilled apartments or drafty row houses. Some are old, and alone, and frail, trapped by their age and frailty in muffling cocoons of loneliness and despair. Some are refugees, clawing their way toward hope against all odds and in the face of terrible degradation and danger. And some, a few, are fat and sassy, but they for the life of them cannot find any peace or meaning that makes sense beyond the next day's market quotations.

And yet, knowing this—as each of us surely does, because we are not people without empathy and love, because we are a people who feel in the pain of others a shadow of that pain ourselves—still, knowing and seeing that pain and despair, we have come here. This sturdy little band of people—us—is gathered tonight in this warm and holy place for sustenance and celebration, for hope, and perhaps for a touch of glory.

It seems an enormous contradiction in terms, doesn't it? All that darkness, all that suffering, all that humanity fumbling through life generation after generation—and then, into all of that, directly into all of that, comes light, and mercy, and grace.

You know, we are a people of story. Our whole history of salvation, the history we claim of our millennia old relationship with the Holy, is story, and story upon story, gathering force and focus as we learn more and more, or again and again, over time, about the nature of our relationship with the Holy, and catch, each in our own generation, a clearer sense of the heart of the mystery of the Holy. And in the heart of that story of ours darkness pierced, time and again, by light.

But what we celebrate this night is the unique revelation of the Holy that we claim as God's people in Christ. The story we hear tonight, first from the first Isaiah, then from the Psalmist, then from the pen of the great storyteller, Luke, and finally from the writings of Paul or someone writing on his behalf—that story embraces all time and all place and comes to rest among us again, here, on this cold dark night. And it is a story of miracle.

We all know now that very little of the Christmas story we enact year after year, in our crèches and candles and pine and holly, very little can possibly have really have happened. Christmas is not about history, or at least it's not a good rendition of historical fact. It's sad, like learning about Santa Claus. But like that punctured tale, it's also about growing into a new understanding of the power of the story. Just this week, I learned of a plausible theory that suggests that Jesus—who did exist in our factual history—yet may have been born as early as 6 or 5 B.C., thus confounding the millennialists. The magic of this new conjecture is the discovery that about that time, there appeared in the skies over Palestine a star bright and memorable to find its way onto a Roman coin commemorating Roman dominion of Israel. We also now know that the census described in the Gospel tonight did not take place at the time or in the way we've heard in our

story from our earliest days. Of the manger we are uncertain, and of the inhospitable, or hospitable—depending on your point of view—inkeeper, not a shred of evidence exists. All the facts point away from that part of the story. Whether or not there were shepherds we do not know. There may have been.

What we can be sure of is that somewhere, sometime long ago, a man called Jesus was born, very human, pushing out of his mother, painning her like every other baby emerging into the world. We know he grew up, though we know nothing of his early life. We know he burst on the Galilean scene in a small way, thought even by himself at first to be a prophet or teacher, albeit one of enormous magnetism. We know his ministry grew as he preached and healed and taught and touched and finally, suffering horribly, died nailed to a cross of wood, probably on a hill outside Jerusalem where Rome executed criminals and rebels and malcontents every day. That is what we know of the facts.

From that meager parcel of fact, we have emerged, people of light, people who claim that the Holy is best understood as standing among us, one of us, suffering with us, laughing with us, playing with us, crying with us, but always as a holy sign that connects us directly with the Divine and speaks the name of the Holy to us. And that name is love: love that enters our darkness so powerfully that it can save us from our darkness, can transform us, all of us—but only if we are also willing to enter the darkneses of others where the powerful light and love and healing reconciling work of God are most needed.

If we are willing to follow that light into darkness, then tonight we must celebrate. There can be no choice.

From that point in time and space where God joins every suffering, bewildered, struggling, pained, tortured, starving human heart, if we will go there and live our lives beyond ourselves and into those lives of pain and hurt, no matter how powerful our own hurting hearts, we will find there the manger, once more, where it always is and has been and will be. Right there in the middle of all that darkness is lies the holiest love we can know. We may very well experience that love first as a little baby, naked, cold, and wailing away at the new light piercing our eyes, but if we have journeyed to that manger, we will find in it the assurance that we will grow, and be raised up, and be strengthened, and be upheld in God's heart forever, able then to stand in the places our journeys will take us.

In those rough and scary mangers, you see, we begin our en-light-en-ment. We begin to know the grace of God. In those mangers where we will inevitably land if we are doing the will of God, we will be filled, and this is a sure thing, we will be filled with the power of God's pure holiness, God's very own active compassion.

And filled, we will join the thunder of the sea. We will laugh with the fields of joy. We will join all the trees of the wood and shout with joy. We will be bound to tell the story from the highest mountain and to exalt in God's compassionate presence in the lowest, hardest places.

And everywhere we go, God is with us. We behold salvation. The angels of God surround and uphold us and lead us, again and again, to the place of incarnation, enacted, over and over, across the fragile web of human time, at the tables of God everywhere, where we come together to feast on the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us.

"...the angel of God said to them, "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 a Savior, who is Messiah, who is the Holy One."

Do not be afraid. God is with us. Alleluia. Amen.