

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**  
**Holy Comforter**  
**Richmond, VA**  
**Christmas 2014**

**Readings:** Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20.

### **Christmas: God's Hope in Action**

How does God come to us; how does God touch our lives?  
We are invited to ponder that question in view of Christmas.  
It is a lot to consider; we like Mary are invited to ponder all that we have heard in our hearts.

Tonight/today we celebrate a most unlikely event; we proclaim and celebrate what to many must have looked like an ordinary occurrence...or even worse, a scandal.

A woman gives birth to a child..and there are rumors, about who the father is; many are surprised that Joseph stayed with Mary.  
The birth of a child, an ordinary occurrence, under less than ideal circumstances.

Let's pull back from everything we think we know about Christmas, everything it means to us now, everything that puts the Little Drummer boy into the nativity scene...and let us look at what the story presents.

This is a view of the story, that inspired the title of a book by J. Ellsworth Kalas entitled, *Christmas From the Backside*.

Homeless people on the road -- down on their luck it seemed.

To give birth away from family, away from the women who certainly would have helped Mary during her labor and delivery ---such is not a happy story, not much joy here or is there, even from the backside?

What do we learn about God from the setting of the story?  
And how is it good news for us?

Those who wrote of Jesus' birth had a number of things in mind, a number of things that they wanted us to know...**they wanted us to know**...you and me...here and now...because this birth was for us, for you, for me, as well as for all creation and all the people.

So, what do we learn from the setting of the story, before the shepherds and the angels come on the scene?

First, God works wonders in the lives of ordinary people who open their hearts to God and the ways of God.

...often in surprising, unexpected ways.

Of course, God is at work in everyone's life, but perhaps those who open their hearts to God are in a good position to recognize God at work.

And though a situation may look bleak, desperate ---as it was with Mary being very pregnant and having to travel because of the political and economic powers of the day, everything is out of her control;

Mary and Joseph were of no account to the powerful in their world---but God was at work in their lives even in those difficult circumstances.

The account of Jesus' birth helps us to remember that our lives as spiritual beings are about more than what can be observe with the eye.

And yet, at the same time, this was more than a one-time spiritual experience for a few.

The birth of Jesus, the Christ, God-with-us, our Emmanuel, was an event that happened in the physical realm, in a time and a place.

More was happening than most could see, but it was happening in the world for the world.

This teaches us that our spirituality is most alive when it is grounded in the reality of life here and now.

I love the words from the hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem,"

“the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

So much of life is made up of hopes and fears.

Christmas comes this year, breaking into our lives whether we are feeling hopeful or fearful, or a mix....and so it is every year...where are you in your life tonight/today?

The holidays can be a difficult time for many...we are supposed to be happy, right?...almost pressure to have the perfect Christmas, the perfect holiday, everything and everyone in place.

The holiday can be difficult, but the holy day of Christmas will not disappoint.

For Christ is born to us, right where we are...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

And it is all grace...you don't have to do anything or be a certain way...Jesus is born to us as pure gift.

What are your hopes and your fears?

The point where our hopes and our fears meet the true message of Christmas, this is where we find ourselves, and open ourselves to an even deeper relationship with God.

Christ is born into our world for a very specific reason and for each of us just as we are, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

I'm will return to that reason in a bit.

As we prepared for Christmas over these last four weeks, I spoke on more than one occasion about 'hope'.

Because we were created in God's image, knowing something of our own hopes gives us, at least in a sense, limited as it may be, an understanding of God's hope.

For what have we been longing?

Do we not long for community and connection?

Do we not hope for justice and peace here in Richmond and

everywhere?

These are but a few of our hopes, and as Brian McLean states in his book, *We Make the Road by Walking*, “Desires, hopes, and dreams inspire action, and that is what makes them so different from a wish.

Wishing is a substitute for action...our desires, hopes, and dreams for the future guide us in how we act now.”<sup>1</sup>

Christmas, the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of Christ, was the result of God’s hope... God desired us and longed and longs for us, for connection with us, and with all people and with the creation.

The hopes of God were spoken through God’s prophets and still are. Isaiah described hopes and dreams of a divine nature, that those in darkness would see a great light, that a child to be born would bring peace, justice, righteousness now and forever.

Such was not God’s wish, but God’s hope, and God acted in light of that hope, in many ways throughout the history of humanity, and then in the most unlikely place with the most unsuitable people, surrounded by the lowest of the low, the dirty shepherds; God’s hope gave birth to Jesus.

And the words of the prophets, the hopes of God, would be made manifest in the life of Christ and in the on-going life of Christ...in the Church, and in you and me when we dare to hold the hopes of God in our hearts for ourselves and for the world...we hold these hopes, and we act.

God “made the road by walking” and because of that, we know the way.

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<sup>1</sup> McLaren, Brian D. *We Make The Road By Walking: A Year Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation*. New York: Jericho Books, 2014. Epub edition, p. 63 of 279.

What makes the Christmas story real for us is that it continues, and with the eyes of faith we see it, among us- this light, in great darkness...we see it.

We see it as if at this moment a multitude of angels fill this space, and we hear these words, "Do not be afraid...there is good news of great joy for all the people."

God's hoped and God acted, and Jesus was born, the Incarnation of Christ, God with-us, our Emmanuel, so that God could help us, lead us, inspire us, and most of all enjoy us, knowing us so well, each person, you are the only of you, the only one precious in God's sight, worth being born for, into a messy world.

What was this like for God?

So often we think about how we feel about God, but how did God feel? During the Children's Sermon at 4pm, I used an example, a way of thinking about how God might have felt, that I think is useful for adults too.

I asked the children to think of how they felt when they were in the car on a long trip and couldn't wait to get there...or maybe a short trip across town, but getting there would mean so much being able to see people they love or do the fun activity they were going to do.

Remember how that felt?

Can we connect with that feeling of childhood?

So much excitement; you just can't wait to get there.

I think that is how it was for God; God couldn't wait to be with us; God couldn't wait to get close to us through Jesus.

We have heard often that Christ died for us and that is so, but being born was also an offering, a gift, a sacrifice for God...to be born into a messy world.

Christ was born for us...  
God hoped, and God acted.

Christ was born for us...  
because God hoped to be close to us, longed for us, to love us and all  
the world.

God longed to be our light in the darkness, to show us  
the way forward...that is the point, that is the central message  
of Christmas...it does not change,  
but it is always fresh because we change and therefore,

Christmas comes each year to us in a new way...Christ to be born  
in our hearts anew. Amen.