

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith
Holy Comforter
Richmond, VA
Christmas 2016

Readings: John 1:1-5, 10-14; Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20.

Born in Time and Beyond All Time

We gather tonight to celebrate the beginning of our story as
the ones who walk in the way of Jesus.

We gather to celebrate the beginning of God's story with us
through Christ.

We are here because long ago a baby was born and the
angels told the shepherds, this is the One, the time is
now, the the light has come; go and find
Emmanuel, your Savior.

Look for the sign, and you will see, you will know.

Rejoice, for God has come to you, and now dwells with
you, full of grace and truth.

We are here because God chose to enter our story, not in
glory with obvious power, but rather God chose to
come to us as one of us, to walk with us, to invite
us, and to show how, to walk in the way God.

Jesus was born in time...a particular time and place.

But incarnation, the Word made flesh, God with us,
through Jesus the Christ, was beyond time...was, and
is, of eternity.

As the words of our final blessing state: "May God, who in
the Word made flesh joined heaven to earth and earth

to heaven, give you [God's] peace and favor.”
Heaven to earth and earth to heaven...through Christ we
are connected to God now and forever.

The message and the spirituality of Christmas take us to
great heights, but the message and spirituality are
also firmly grounded in what is real about our
world and our lives.

If this is the best Christmas of your life, I'm happy for and
rejoice with you, but for many, Christmas this year
may not come easy...for we look around and we see our divided
nation; we see injustice we see in our
communities and in the world, we see
refugees, and wars, and terrorism.

The innocent hurt; the innocent killed.

In our own lives, we may be ill, we may be tired, we may be
mourning the loss of a loved one, remembering a more joyful
Christmas of the past, and, therefore, this Christmas is not easy.

And we wonder, how does Christmas help; how can
we connect with the joy of Christmas this year so that I
know it matters, beyond a day or two?

Christmas comes every year, with the same message, but
we are different; our world has changed since last
Christmas.

But remember, this joining of earth to heaven and heaven
to earth, happens for us right here and right now.
Jesus, God-with-us, our Emmanuel was born into a violent
world where the politics mattered and rulers had the power;

Jesus was born to ordinary people, and at the margin of society, as the story goes, with the animals, away from home, no place for them but in the straw.

An animal's feeding trough served as his crib.

The birth of our faith came amid difficult circumstances and therefore is a message of hope and grace for all who struggle...when things are not going as we planned, when the night is dark.

Years ago, I was driving to Charlottesville from Alexandria a week or two before Christmas, and I saw a billboard that advised me to stop in Warrenton to enjoy "an old fashioned Christmas."

An old-fashioned Christmas: I thought of snowy streets with horse-drawn carriages and people walking around dressed snugly in wool, and, yes, the warm glow of light coming from the shop windows.

A Christmas land where everything is happy and safe---Christmas under glass.

Like a snowglobe---one of those scenes that you shake and the snowflakes fall down on the little houses and trees.

Christmas enclosed and controlled.

Christmas predictable and safe.

Today, such a billboard might say, "Make Christmas great again!" an old-fashioned Christmas.

As I drove by that billboard, I had an emotional response to an image of Christmas that has never existed, at least for most of the people in the world.

But boy, did it feel good!

It made we want to stop in Warrenton, as it was meant to do.

Christmas enclosed and controlled.
Christmas predictable and safe.

God offers us so much more...has given us so much more.
A few days ago, a reading from Isaiah for Thursday in the
4th week of Advent, we heard:

“Because these people draw near with their mouths and
honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from
me....I will again do amazing things with this
people, shocking and amazing.” (Isaiah 29:13-24)

While we may be searching for an “old-fashioned
Christmas,” or think that Christmas ought to somehow
be like that for us, we ought to be in that mood or
something is wrong with us.

While we may be searching for an “old-fashioned
Christmas,” predictable in what it offers us, God wants
to do new things with us shocking and amazing
things.

The prophet Isaiah who said that God would do a new thing, amazing and
shocking, also said,

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.

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. (Isaiah 9:2-7)

The Christmas that God gives to us stands up to the challenges of the world.

An old-fashion Christmas can feel good for a time, but we need to connect with the shocking and amazing Christmas...of God coming to dwell with us in the midst of trouble, a troubled time with the Romans subjecting the Jewish people

...Herod out to destroy all the children to get the one people were saying was a new King...so bad was the situation that Joseph and Mary would have to flee to Egypt with Jesus, becoming refugees to escape certain death.

This is God who understands our world, our situation.

The old-fashion Christmas that never existed does not speak to our time, to our needs, but the real Christmas does...our need for a Savior, our need for the God-with-us... to show us the way.

The real Christmas, the shocking and amazing event long ago...still amazes as we consider that we are not alone...that the rules of this world are not the final word...that it is the Word made Flesh, Jesus the Christ, who is the true king, the prince of peace.

On this day, we are invited and encouraged to gaze upon the baby Jesus, to hold him in our arms, to feel his

love and his energy for life.

We are invited to enter the scene and be with Jesus, and
Mary, and Joseph...just be in this place in time and
beyond all time...we touch eternity.

Perhaps we start to ponder like Mary, in the days to come,
what does this all mean...for you...for me...for our
communities and the world.

In the bleak mid-winters of our lives, when the world seems
so lost, mess up, we wonder what we can do to help, who we can
be for God,

“What can I give him poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise
man, I would do my part; yet what can I give him, give
my heart.” (as the hymn goes)

If we give our hearts to the Baby Jesus, the meaning and
the message of Christmas can be with us everyday.

Emmanuel, God-with-us, is right here...to be our
Savior...and to show us the way to be light in the
darkness of others.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not
overcome it.”

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your Word made
incarnate. Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in
our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.