

A Sermon Preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Fort Worth
Christmas Day 2011

Merry Christmas! It's not raining inside this morning, so we can celebrate, and it's a particular pleasure for me to celebrate this Christmas with you, since we're going to be spending a good bit of time together between now and about lambing time, when this parish will have a new rector.

And it's also nice to celebrate this morning when Christmas *finally* belongs to the Christians again! As I remember, all this started with us a long time ago, but what's happened to it is not always very nice—especially the way some Christians act about it: raise Cain if you don't mention it, raise Cain if you do, yell at people who don't keep it, likely to drag out a gun and come after ya if . . . well, you know. That bunch. I'm not talking about them but rather about Christians who understand what an humbling time this is for people the likes of you and me who've gotten such a life-changing gift from a God who loves us despite ourselves. And even some of *us* are already finished with Christmas. I remember when I lived in Cleburne, I'd step out on St. Stephen's day, thinking of Good King Wenceslas and the snow crisp and white and even. What I saw up and down Willow Creek Drive were the carcasses of dried up Christmas trees lining the curb! Here at Trinity we'll be singing Christmas carols until the first week of January, so Merry Christmas sure enough.

And even amid the hooraw of the way too many "honor" the season, it's been pretty wonderful. I was here last night with a couple of my grandchildren to see the kiddoes do their pageant, went home, tried to sleep, got up along about eleven, flipped on Univisión and watched the Pope celebrate in that big church in Rome he works at. They *do* take on, and they were joined all around the globe, hour by hour, by faithful people gathering in the dark to sing *O Come, All Ye Faithful* and *Silent Night*, all of it just lovely and wonderful. So this is not a morning I want to flog you to death with a lot of exhortation . . . I mean consider, this is the forty-fifth year I've stood before a Christmas Day congregation and asked the Holy Spirit to send me something fresh, and today I do have two things to say. Two, notice. In seminary we learned we should always have three points. Today you get a special Christmas discount, only two.

First, in synch with the collect for today, is a cautionary note. You recall, the prayer you just said *Amen* to not only thanks God for sending us the babe but also reminds us that Christ will come again to be our judge. In light of that, I think we start by wondering what it is about Christmas, this widely shared yet often misunderstood celebration, that seems to bring out the worst in people? My soul, in this country we pepper spray each other, walk over each other, all but riot to buy some wretched toy or a pair of tennis shoes that cost \$180.00 while a huge percentage of the kids in the country don't have one decent pair of shoes. Why does a celebration all about meek and mild make people crazy?

I think the answer goes a long way beyond religion. This feast is all about some of humanity's deepest, most powerful urges—the love of life, the longing to love and belong, about families and mothers and fathers and children, all that. Christians have no monopoly on that, and a lot of people who know Christ little or not at all are drawn by the power of the images, the emotion, the human craving. I suppose that's neither good nor bad, but in this country we run aground on the sad intersection of the Charles Dickens Christmas and the marketing industry *sans* ethics, and you know it's not a pretty sight. I'm the fool who decided to go do something on South Hulen last Friday. Oh, my. And that horror show was repeated all over the place. Why is it so many around us, starving for what Christmas offers, end up finding their way to mayhem?

I mentioned Dickens. I reckon his *Carol* is about the next best known Christmas story after Luke's version you just heard the deacon read. If you recall, before he sends Scrooge out to lavish his newfound generosity on the Cratchitts, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come pulls back his great, glittering cape to reveal two "wolfish" children crouching there. Their names are Ignorance and Want, and they are dangerous. The ghost warns Scrooge that until those children are loved and cared for, no one is really safe. There's a message there for us. What about our witness to the gospel has failed to dispel the Ignorance of the God of love that rages about us like a roaring and a ramping lion, seeking whom it may devour? What, I ask myself, have I not said, done, prayed, to roll that Ignorance back? What in the witness of this congregation, the Episcopal Church, the whole body of Christ in earth must change to overcome that hot Ignorance with the love God entrusts us to share with those who know him not? And in the Want

department. I live over in East Fort Worth, and on my way around town I usually drive right through the Tenderloin, old Panther City, at least twice a day; and let me tell you, there are some folks over there who aren't having a Merry Christmas, very rarely have a nice day. What have I not done, said, prayed that keeps Want's numbers growing? What can I, can you, can Trinity Church, any of us who say we love God do to find the right way to feed, clothe, shelter, comfort Want? I know many here are involved in one way or another with obeying those commandments, though we too often get bogged down in the method. All I know is, we've got to be about it, and until we are, we've got no right to celebrate our own blessedness.

So that's the cautionary point, and I lay it to all our consciences as we celebrate today.

Now the other one, and it's . . . well . . . theological. Sorta. This festival is tied to a specific and fundamental Christian teaching, namely the Doctrine of the Incarnation. Now, you know what theology is. That's a territory where we scramble around trying to find the words to wrap around our ineffable experience of the mystery of God, and those words are never sufficient, never adequate. Yet we try, and I think we should. Words are an important way we communicate, so I'm glad that people in seminaries and universities go through the exercise of trying to get it said. And for the record let me see how quickly I can say Christmas in theology. We experience God as three persons and name them Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, Holy Spirit/Sanctifier. The second person is that about God which, for reasons we don't entirely understand but are all about love, seems bent on marrying himself to his creation in its very physical being, to us in our very flesh. One night in history, a little boy was born in Palestine, and history changed; but nothing changed in the godhead. That's just god's nature, unchanging and irresistible. Or maybe more simply, as Bishop Terwilliger used to say of the sacraments, the Father sends the Spirit so the Son may be present. That's slick. Right? And mighty wordy and sorta . . . distant.

Let's try again. As a preacher, I listen hard to the world around me, trying to spot God at work, because I think you find analogies easier to understand than theologies. And, by golly, I got a real Christmas gift in one of those moments just this week. Let me offer it to you. Years ago at Camp Crucis I was a young priest and became aware of a

camper, a senior in high school then. He was from Dallas where his father was a successful business man. The boy inherited the family business and took it places, what I mean. Now he's in his sixties, and last week I had lunch with him while I was doing some business of my own over in that big, rowdy town just east of Grand Prairie. We were catching each other up on family, kids and grandkids (mine), this and that. He's sired two daughters, one born perfect and still perfect, so he tells me. The second, well, she wasn't born perfect. In fact, she weighed just a pound and a half, and her little head wasn't put together right. Our brains produce fluid, and it has to drain, and hers didn't drain. So fluid built up, cut off the oxygen, all really scary. The doctors said No Way. And he, responding to that urge for life and love I mentioned earlier, said Yes Way and clung to that baby girl's life like it were his own. Well, the results were good. The girl's sixteen today and an equestrienne, and all that made medical history.

What I want you to know, though, is a detail I hadn't learned before. While my friend was out chasing down doctors willing to take risks, his wife—can you imagine the feeling of helplessness, the agony she knew?—would go to the hospital where the baby lay in a little bitty incubator. Of course, she couldn't hold her child, but the incubator had a pair of rubber gloves, thin enough to do medical procedures in, and she'd pull up something to sit on, put her hands in those gloves, and just hold her child. Just hold her. Hours on end. And while she held her, that baby's blood oxygen levels rose. And stayed up. Wow. Does that do something to your innards? It sure did to mine. That baby knew who was holding her, and she latched onto life—and lived.

I was digesting the conversation on the way home when it hit me. That's just a whole lot the way we experience the incarnation of Christ in us. We don't know, we can't see, there's just a gossamer thin veil between us, but when we're in God's hands, we know we're safe, we know who's holding us, we get stronger, we live. The relation is as intimate as . . . a baby's in its mother's womb. Call God father, mother, whatchawant, but we *know* who's holding us. And we get well. The difference, of course, between us and that baby is, she couldn't wiggle. We can wiggle. And we do wiggle, right often, just a minute or maybe a right long time, wiggle out of God's loving hands. And when we do, the oxygen in our souls drops and we get sick and do bad things and eventually die . . . unless we wiggle back in. I'm an English teacher, you know, and as I drove back

home I remembered a wonderful passage in Nobel prizewinner Tony Morrison's early novel *Sula*, not as popular as the Oprah books, but I think maybe her best. In that book, Morrison says about the people she's writing about that they knew the only way to avoid God's heavy hand was to get in it. I'd like to tilt that a little and say that when we are out of God's hand, it can sure seem heavy. But when we turn around—repent—and rush back into God's hands, we know we're home. And we get well. And we live.

Well, there you are. That's what the Holy Spirit gave me, and I offer it to you this year. So now let's finish saying our prayers, and feast at the Lord's table, and then go home to our own families, our children and mothers and fathers and all those we love. It's only right. And while we're there and for every day of the Year of Grace to come, not just the six crazy weeks before Christmas, not just for show, let's keep in mind the world, Forth Worth isCh full of those who need the gifts only we, only you, only this parish, only those who hold the faith of Jesus can offer. God give us the joy and the strength to offer them all year long so that all God's wandering children one day can sing with us, Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her king!

Amen.