

Trinity Episcopal Church, Fort Worth, Texas
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2011
The Rev. William B. Wright, D.Min., Interim Rector

Lesson: Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm: 96

Lesson: Titus 2:11-14

Gospel: Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Let me begin by wishing you a Merry Christmas. I am sure that I am not the first to do that but perhaps one of the first to wish you that on Christmas Day this year.

We have completed our observance of the Church Season of Advent and now begin our observance of the twelve day Season of Christmas. We will begin our observance with the celebration of the Christ Mass, the service for which the season is named.

It is said that on July 4th 1776, King George III of England wrote in his diary, "Nothing of importance happened today". Little did he know that it was the day that the American Revolution had begun and it would have profound effect upon him and his people.

Someone might easily have made the same comment over two thousand years ago on the day Jesus was born. Perhaps King Herod himself felt that it was a day of no particular importance. The insignificant birth of a baby in a stable in Bethlehem would eventually be seen as such an important event that for the Western world at least, all history hinges on this event and is listed as either having been before or after the birth of Jesus.

One thing I have learned about God in my years in the ordained ministry is that God does not do things the way I think God will do them. Regardless of how much planning I do, God seems to break in with other plans, sometimes quite different from the ones I had. In short, God just does not do it the way we plan.

The birth of Jesus is a perfect example that God does not work according to our plans. God caught everybody by surprise. The Messiah came, but he was not a ruler leading his armies to victory. He was born in a stable, probably one that was in a cave. There was no royal retinue, only a few farm animals and an assortment of shepherds. Can you imagine that - shepherds? They were considered unclean people by the religious leaders of their day because they were not able to follow the laws of ritual cleanliness and were exposed to death on a regular basis. Also, they were not allowed to be witnesses for legal purposes. They were on a par with tax collectors in this sense.

It is ironical that both the beginning and end of Jesus' earthly ministry were spent with people who could not even be considered legal witnesses to the events they saw. His birth was witnessed by shepherds who could not be considered to be credible witnesses. His Resurrection was first witnessed by a woman, again one of the members of that society

who could not be a legal witness.

I guess God has always surprised us. We are constantly surprised by joy as we happen upon God in our daily lives.

Years ago when I was in seminary in Sewanee, Tennessee it was around Christmas time when one of my friends went into Tullahoma, Tennessee to do some shopping. As he went in front of a department store he saw a ragged little boy begging for money. He happened on the scene just as a woman was sending her son to give the boy some money. She said to her son, "Give the boy a nickel, Jimmy, but don't get too close."

The woman wanted so much to help the poor boy but she feared getting involved.

Today we give thanks that God did get involved in creation with our world, with all its dirtiness and corruption, and that world has not been the same since.

In the Prologue to the Gospel of John we are told that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). The original Greek for this verse is that, "the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us." John is telling us that in Jesus God moved right in among us. He in fact became part of the human family so that we might become part of God's family.

This is why Jesus is called Emmanuel, God with us.

In the Hebrew Scriptures God is referred to as the bridegroom and Israel as the bride. In the Christian Scriptures Jesus is referred to as the bridegroom and the Church as the bride. When Jesus was asked to tell which was the most important of the 613 laws he responded, "The first commandment is this: Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31).

When John was describing God in his first epistle, he simply wrote, "God is love" (1 John 4:8b).

The baby in the manger in Bethlehem introduces us to the love of God. He is the result of the union between God and his people, and it is in this baby that we see the love of God and the presence of Emmanuel, God with us.

Jesus is Emmanuel. He is still with us, and the question this time of the year is still, will we make room for him in our lives?

I am reminded of one Christmas play in which Wally was recruited to play the role of the innkeeper in the Christmas story. Wally was bigger than the other children in his second grade class and could play the part of the innkeeper in Bethlehem who was somewhat menacing. But Wally was a hopeful, willing, smiling lad, a natural defender of the

underdog, and well liked by his classmates. Also he really wanted to be a shepherd, not an innkeeper. None-the-less Wally was cast as the innkeeper who had to turn the holy family away when they needed lodging. When the play opened Wally was caught up in the action of this poor family seeking lodging for a pregnant woman. When they came to the inn Joseph asked for lodging. Wally replied, "Seek it elsewhere." Then Joseph said that his wife was pregnant, tired and in need of a place to stay and have her baby. Wally made no reply. The prompter whispered his next line to him: "No! Be gone!" Wally made no reply. Then as the forlorn couple turned and began to slowly move away, Wally's lip quivered and his brow furrowed with concern. Tears welled up in his eyes, and suddenly he cried out, "Don't go! You can have my room."

History has not recorded what happened next in the play.

We get the word "holiday" from the term "holy day." The observance of religious holy days led to the establishment of holidays during which people had time from work for rest, relaxation and worship.

God surprised the world with his love as he sent the Savior, born of a woman; a baby in a manger. There was no room in the inn. If we make room in our lives for Emmanuel then this holiday can become again a holy day that will change our lives forever.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Amen