

My heart is full of joy on this Christmas Eve as I greet you. I love having Bill and his daughters and their families, all ten of them! - and I love having my sons Tom and Rob and his fiancée, Amy here tonight. But it is also with wonder and some curiosity that I imagine all the reasons we come here on this night - what it is that draws us here. It's too easy to say we come here, this night, to hear the Christmas story and to sing and hear the lovely carols. For many of us, the story still has magic, and the lovely music can move us to tears. But for others of us, the story has become too familiar, even stale, or our skepticism has drained it of all meaning except for a quaint, nostalgic appeal. As for the carols, some of us may be quite sick of them, having heard them in malls and on the radio, mixed with all sort of cheesy pop Christmas music ever since Halloween!

But I do think that most of us come with a longing - that on this night it will all be beautiful and fresh again. We bring with us such a rich tapestry of feelings and experience, and, whether or not we are believers in the traditional sense, I suspect many of us come with an almost wistful hope for meaning and for some sense of the ineffable mystery we call God.

And, like preachers everywhere and every year, I struggle with what to say about Christmas that might have meaning for all of us and that might make even a small difference in the lives we'll return to, after tomorrow. "The real meaning of Christmas" is, of course, a cliché; it is perhaps as various as each one of us, and in our secular world, understanding Christmas is certainly not automatic - as this brief story illustrates:

A little girl was riding around with her Dad and noticing the neighborhood Christmas lights. From her car seat she ventured, "Daddy, I know what Noel means." Her father replied, "Great, tell Daddy what it means." And the little girl proclaimed, "Noel means no water". Grinning, the dad had to admit, "You know, sweetie, you're right - no well means no water!" So, what does Noel, Christmas, mean?

You will have your own answers, but I can tell you two things that I believe about Christmas. They may ring true for you - they may not, but I think they are true to the Christmas story in Luke's gospel and can make a difference in the way we live.

First, I believe Christmas is about something real, not only for Christians, but for all people, and that is that God is, and that God is with us and in us, always has been and always will be. The story that Luke wrote down expresses this with great beauty and power, this coming together of heaven and earth on a

night long ago in Bethlehem. He envisions the glory of angels singing to awe-struck shepherds. He places the loving care of God shining forth in the most humble of settings – just a stable to protect a poor couple who had traveled a long way to comply with the Roman ruler’s decree that they register in their home city. Luke’s story places God’s presence at the heart of an awkward, counter-cultural situation – a couple with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Everything about the story points to the immanence of God – God with us – a power of love and creativity through which new life and possibility are born, even in the most unlikely places.

Other faith traditions express this intuition differently, and perhaps less adequately. The Christian story of God becoming flesh and blood in Jesus was a new and unique take on Incarnation, but even so it points to all Incarnation – every time in our lives, anywhere in our world, that we glimpse the mystery at the heart of creation. T.S. Eliot writes as poignantly of this truth which is incarnation as anyone I know in this passage from the third of his “Four Quartets”. He writes of the way only saints are granted access to the “point of intersection of the timeless with time” and then this:

For most of us, there is only the unattended  
Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
While the music lasts. These are only hints and  
guesses,  
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.  
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is  
Incarnation.”

Eliot writes about Incarnation in language for our century and our time. He writes of our yearning for depth, both beyond us and within us. Luke’s Christmas story, written so long ago about God with us in Jesus speaks to that same longing, answering it with the miracle of a baby’s birth, perhaps the miracle which is any birth.

The second thing I believe about Christmas, and it flows from the first, is that we are not to live in fear! That is the message of the angels – “Do not be afraid” as they bring their news of peace and joy for all people!

Ever since 9/11, fear has more and more shaped our public discourse and our private anxieties – chiefly about terror, but also about the economy and our health and the environment and a government we find hard to trust, and our tarnished role in the world. We live too much in expectation of the worst cases. When we live reactively, defensively, mistrustfully, we create a climate of fear that destroys hope.

And, without hope, we can't make it. Without hope, we cannot face serious illness, financial disaster, horrendous failures, tragic mistakes, needless, pointless warring, staggering poverty and affliction in so many places. Without hope, it is often hard to bear our own solitude, the trials of aging, and finally, death itself. We fear all of these things, and, if we let fear win, then we live without hope, and our humanity is defeated.

The Christmas story challenges these fears. The truth of Incarnation challenges fear. If God really is, and really is with us, then hope is not unfounded. When have you been slammed up against the worst you can imagine – your worst fear? What happened then? You may have thought you would fall apart – die of pain or shame or grief. But most likely, you didn't. You kept on and kept on, and people cared and helped you, and, slowly, the shadows lifted, and your heart got lighter, and one day you were surprised by, of all things, joy, like a miracle. It is of such times in life that hope is born, and I believe it comes as a gift of grace, unbidden. If we can hang onto those times; if we can trust those times when we made it through, then it's easier to hope again, easier not to live in fear. The peace and joy promised by the Christmas angels are legitimate hopes, worth our longing and our striving. Do not be afraid!

Finally, in addition to two things I believe about the Christmas story, here's one of the ways I experience Christmas the most profoundly, and it happens almost every year. Late on Christmas Eve, or very early on Christmas Day – around 1 pm, I come out of the church by myself into the night. The building is dark then, and closed after the services, and the hundreds of people have gone home. I am full of the music and of the beauty of our worship, and of so much warmth and good feeling from being with this beloved community, but now it's over, and I'm heading home. Outside, I welcome the crisp, cold air, even sometimes the rain or sleet or snow. I look up into the heavens – star-filled or not, but vast and still – and, on this night, it really seems they are heavens, and the whole story does feel true for all this weary world, and, by then, especially for this weary priest. It's Christmas, and the night and the story still have magic for me. I'm filled with awe and faith and wild hope and a longing for its meaning to endure and shape my life. May the meaning of Christmas touch all of us; may we know God with us; and may we live beyond fear, this night and always. Amen.