

December 25, 2008

Christmas Day, Year B

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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It is finally here. It is Christmas. On the Church calendar we are finished with our spiritual preparation, the four weeks of Advent, in which we were reminded to Keep Awake, Prepare the Way for the coming of the Lord, the light of Christ into the world. We are finished with the season of preparation.

We are finished with the trees, the lights, the menu planning, most of the travel, buying and wrapping presents. Many of you will go home and open your gifts after church today (unless you have young children who insisted on opening the gifts at 6:00 a.m.). However, if we get too distracted with the rituals of Christmas day, the presents and the food, we forget what we are really celebrating. We miss the gifts we have been given.

Today we celebrate the incarnation. God breaks into the world taking human form. God begins the saving action that will culminate in the death and resurrection of Christ. God reaches out to humanity, out of love, in order to bring humanity back to God. The incarnation is an astonishing action by God. Adding to that astonishment is how God went about it all.

First, consider the shepherds. Shepherds often conjure up pleasant pastoral images for us of the countryside, grazing sheep and shepherds who loving care for their flocks. However, at the time of the birth of Jesus, this was not considered a prize vocation. Shepherds were considered shiftless and dishonest. They were likely to allow their flocks to graze on other people's lands. They were a scorned group, a group of outcasts. Our rector reminded us last night that shepherds were not the type of characters you wanted to have hanging around at the birth of your child. However, God chose to reveal to them the coming of the Messiah. They are the ones who receive the message from the Lord by an angel and they are the first to visit the newborn king. They are the first to break the news about the Messiah, rather than the social elite of the day.

Next, we have Mary. Earlier in the story she receives a revelation from the angel Gabriel about God's intention to make her the mother of the Son of God. She is young, does not hold a position of authority, and is not wealthy. Mary, because of her status, or rather, her lack of any real status by our standards, might seem to be an unlikely bearer of God. However, Mary humbly welcomes this news and gives birth to Jesus.

Next, we have Jesus, God incarnate, who is born into our world in a humble setting. Consider what we believe about God. God is the creator, the one who took a formless void and brought our world into existence. God is the one who

gives us life. This is God the almighty, who intervened on behalf of God's people, bringing them out of bondage in Egypt. However, now God is born in human form, an infant, reliant on the care of human beings in order to live. It might be reasonable for one to assume that the Almighty Creator would have broken into the world in a different way. However, God chooses to reveal God's self, first as an infant, born into a humble setting, born with the capacity to love. God in man comes into the world dependent on human beings to be nurtured, sustained and raised into one who could go on do the work of the Father.

The incarnation, both in its announcement to the world and in its execution by God is counterintuitive to our notions of power and authority. We generally idealize people with a pedigree, position of authority, or wealth and overlook those who are on the margins. We generally praise the self sufficient and scoff at those who are in need. Yet God chose to work through the outcasts and the marginalized.

This is good news for us. All of us at one time or another has felt marginalized by others, or cast out by loved ones, or incapable of helping ourselves at times. The holiday season can be a particular painful time for some people, bringing up terrible feelings of loss and inadequacy, often times generated as a result of dysfunctional family systems. The incarnation gives us the gift of the assurance that we are all good enough in the eyes of God. When someone hurts us rejects us, God is with us. Though we might not think of ourselves as worthy, God breaks through to those who would seem least likely to experience God's grace.

On the flip side of that, many of us if not all have at one time or another have hurt someone, or cast out someone, or undermined someone, or refused to help another in need. We are reminded by the birth narratives, indeed the entire life and ministry of Jesus that we are called to be something greater than we currently are. The life and ministry of Jesus Christ gives us the assurance that God deals with of favorably, out of love. We have been given the gift of God's presence on earth, showing us how to break the cycle of hurt and pain, how to live fully in God, and in doing so become more human and more free with a greater capacity for love.

Lastly, we are given the gift of opportunity. The birth of Christ points of the need for human participation in the divine action. God chose to enter the world as one dependent on others. Human participation was necessary to in order to enact this plan. Mary was active as the God bearer. The Shepherds participated in spreading the word about the Christ child. Mary and Joseph would have to raise the child who would do the will of the father. We continue this participation in the incarnation today. Jesus promised to send us his Spirit. As we receive that spirit, that light, we must continue to nurture and raise it in ourselves so that we can continue that work. The incarnation is a continual process. But it gives us the opportunity to lead a life of meaning and purpose if we choose to engage our Lord. It is a wonderful gift to us all.

Christmastime is a wonderful time. It is also filled with distraction. However, our preparation for Christmas, or participation in worship today points us to God in Christ, who loves the world and humanity and showers us with grace.