
Homily for Christmas

A sermon by Canon Todd D. Smelser

Merry Christmas! For all the years that I have been serving the Church, the Christmas Day service has always been one of favorites. After the all the pageantry and processions and crowds of Christmas Eve, today's liturgy is a thoughtful reminder that the Christmas season has only begun. While many churches don't have any services on Christmas Day, we Episcopalians, like our Roman Catholic neighbors, always do. Reclaiming Christmas Day also entails recasting Christmas Eve. Last evenings services focused on expectation and anticipation. Mary and Joseph arrive at the place of nativity, the anticipation mounts and finally, the moment of delivery. After communion we also join in "Silent Night, Holy Night" and then leave church singing "Joy the World, the Lord has come."

Christmas Day, on the other hand, is much quieter and reflective. It's a day for settling in to the Good News. Exhausted and overwhelmed by the previous' night's events, Mary and Joseph aren't to be found, and if we were up that late, we too might be a bit groggy this morning. Perhaps somewhere in all of this we soon realize that life will never again be the same. The question of the moment is not "Joy to the World" but "What Child is this?"

When we think of the Christmas story, we think of Matthew and Luke, because Mark doesn't have a birth narrative of Jesus. Luke, who wrote the familiar story we heard last night, was a bit of historian. He was concerned about getting the dates and rulers right and locating these holy events in space and time. As a gentile, he was more concerned with those outside of the circle, like the shepherds, that he was of the kings. Luke also tells the story from the perspective of Mary, and lowly maiden who becomes the bearer of God's good news, even out of wedlock. Matthew's version is more traditional. Since he was probably a Jew, he was concerned in making it clear that Jesus fulfilled all of those Old Testament prophecies as Messiah, as King of the Jews. He didn't care nearly as much about the shepherds as he did about the royal wise men. Matthew also told the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's point of view.

There is John's story, written perhaps as much as a generation after the other two. John probably knew these earlier stories, and assumes that we do too. John is not a story teller, but rather a theologian and mystic. John begins his account in the language of mystery: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Suddenly our desire to be entertained by liturgical splendor is thwarted. But our need to be grounded is met, in this vision of a savior who refuses to be pinned down to our overly precise human expectations. John begins the story much earlier as well. He reminds us that Christmas really begins just before the beginning of Genesis, before the beginning with God in the story of creation. Using similar language to that first book of the Hebrew Bible, John begins by talking about the Word of God, the word of God in action, creating, revealing and redeeming. "The Word was with God and the Word was God. Finally in culmination, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That's the punch line of the whole story. God didn't send an emissary, another prophet or even an angel to get our attention. God sent God's own self in Jesus.

In all the versions of the Christmas story, there is one image that all the writers use to talk about Christmas. They all talk about light--the light of star over Bethlehem, the light that shone around the shepherds, the true light that enlightens every person. It is this light that shines on all of those who live in darkness, and shows them a way home.

In the retelling of the Christmas story, a light begins to shine. Once again we are able to see again--to see who we really are and who created us to be. In the person of Jesus we have now received the gift that makes human life so valuable and

divine. Yet we know that while this birth brings light to the world, that light will be made more visible by the surrounding darkness. For light is defined by the shadows that surround it. As we are all too aware, darkness does exist. It is real and terrifying. But the light of life, the light that God brings to us anew this day, will persist and prevail. The life that is light "is chased by the darkness, but is not overtaken by it."

In the third of his *Four Quartets*, the poet T. S. Eliot meditates on the paradox of time and suggests that there are privileged moments when we seem to transcend time, when our earth and flesh are one with eternity and when God gives birth to the mystery of love.

"There are only hints and guesses," he writes. "Hints followed by guesses; and the rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action. The hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood is Incarnation."

During this Christmas season we gather in tiny chapels and great Cathedrals, stepping out of everyday lives to intersect with the timeless liturgy of God. We come here with our hints and guesses, seeking the light that might disperse our darkness. Bombarded by way too many words, we come to hear the WORD, which has the power to call each of us by name, and to renew us again in God's love.

Above all, Christmas Day is a day of hope, even in the midst of the incomprehensible violence that has invaded our well-being and the lives of our children. The Word has come to dwell with us, and we have seen God's glory, glory full of grace and truth. We receive that promise only in faith, for John refuses to pin down our hopes to anything more specific than the gift of a child, the One who was, and is becoming, the Word. Like the parents of a newborn we are left to ponder his future...our future. Is there more that we should do? Is there a list of rules to keep us all safe? No, there is just the Child--his life and his presence, and the promise of "grace upon grace" that will unfold in our future.

May God grant you the light of Christmas, which is faith; the belief of Christmas, which is hope; the warmth of Christmas, which is love; the radiance of Christmas, which is truth; and the Joy of Christmas which is God. Amen