
And Still More Christmas

A sermon by the Rev. Deacon Juan Sandoval
The First Sunday after Christmas, Year A

On Christmas Day, I saw a neighbor carrying his tree out to the curb for trash pickup. I was a bit sad to see that. Some folks have already packed away their Christmas decorations, so no more rockin' around the Christmas tree—those stockings once hung with care are put away, and the festive lights outside are stored for another year. This contrast between the end of holiday traditions and our continued celebration here today reminds us of the deeper meaning behind these days. We are still living in the season of Christmas, cherishing all twelve days.

Today marks the fourth day of Christmas. By now, if you go by the song, you'd have a partridge in a pear tree, two turtle doves, three French hens, and four calling birds. And yet, we have eight more days to go, culminating with the arrival of the three Magi who bring gifts—a celebration known in many places such as Three Kings Day, Dia de Reyes, Dia de los Tres Magos, Epiphany. This ongoing celebration invites us to stay present to the wonder and promise of the season.

This week is a holy one. Friday was the feast of St. Stephen, the deacon. Saturday honored St. John the Evangelist, and Monday will be the day of the Holy Innocents. Today, however, is the first Sunday after Christmas, and soon, January 1st, we will celebrate the feast of the Holy Name.

So, it is the first Sunday after Christmas—several days since Mary and Joseph welcomed the birth of their child. As I reflect on this, I invite you to remember the births within your own families—your children, grandchildren, and loved ones. After the initial joy, there comes the realization of responsibility for a new life but also hope and dreams for who this child will become. Just as we marvel at new life in our families, so too must we marvel at the gift of Jesus—a child whose birth brings hope to all. What are your hopes for babies in your life? What dreams do you hold for them, and what names do you give those you love?

Do you think God was rejoicing when Jesus, his son—God incarnate, our savior—was born? Was God filled with love and joy? Did God ponder the hopes for this child, or did he already know everything before the birth? Mary and Joseph didn't even have to decide on a name, because the angel had already provided it: Jesus, Emmanuel—God with us. In this personal and divine story, our own experiences of parenthood and wonder find their echo in God's love for humanity.

With this birth to Mary and Joseph, everything changed! The whole world was changed. God not only loved his son, he gave us his son because he loved us—his people, his flock. Our hope depends on God's love, and this hope is a gift to God's church. The incarnation of God in Jesus forever changed the relationship between human beings and God, inviting us into a new closeness and trust.

The words from Genesis come to mind: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," formless and dark, until God said, "Let there be light." Likewise, the words from John this morning echo deeply: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John isn't just speaking of creation, but of re-creation—of God coming close, in flesh and light.

Reflecting on light and darkness brings to mind a pilgrimage I made a few years ago to Avila, Spain, to study one of the great mystics, St. John of the Cross.

St. John was a priest and a poet who penned some of his most profound works during imprisonment for his faith. In prison, he wrote beautiful poems like the *Spiritual Canticle* and *One Dark Night*. Another of his writings, the *Romances*, seems especially fitting for this season. In his cell, with only a sliver of light coming through a

tiny hole, he meditated on the mystery of God's love—drawing from the Gospel of John. Listen:

*As the lover in the beloved each lived in the other,
and the Love that unites them is one with them,
their equal, excellent as the One and the Other: Three Persons, and one Beloved among all three.
One love in them all makes of them one Lover,
and the Lover is the Beloved in whom each one lives.
For the being that the three possess each of them possesses, and each of them loves him who bears this
being.
Each one is this being, which alone unites them, binding them deeply, one beyond words.
Thus it is a boundless Love that unites them, for the three have one love which is their essence; and the more
love is one, the more it is love.*

St. John's reflection reminds us that even in the darkness, God's light finds us. His mystical poetry echoes the Christmas message: that God's love is deeper and more unifying than any separation or hardship.

Christmas Eve is a time of transition. It's the culmination of Advent and the moment when we move from a period of introspection and preparation to Christmas—a season of love, gratitude, and celebration.

This is a season for all families. God sends us his son, the Redeemer for all people—both Jews and Gentiles—to guide and bless every family. This is a time when relationships matter: our relationship to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and with not just our immediate family, but also our extended family, our church, our community, and even those we have yet to meet. No matter where we come from or what our story is, the light of Christ invites each of us into a new relationship with God and one another. Today, perhaps we have the opportunity to draw nearer to Jesus—this fragile and tiny child, who is also our Savior, the one given to us by the Father. He brings us closer to God, bringing heaven to earth, making us God's children. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

The Gospel invites us to know and respond to God's grace and mercy. We are called to be gracious in inviting everyone into the family—strangers, sinners, all are welcome—to become God's people and part of God's church. With this, we can share God's love despite laws, despite organizations or boundaries that might divide us. We must not be slaves to the law; rather, my sisters and brothers, we must be God's people who practice redemption, hospitality, and love. The Gospel is a gospel of peace, love, freedom, and justice for all God's people. Remember: we do not control life—only God does. Thanks be to God.

God saved humanity through Jesus Christ for all people. Christianity offers us a faith of spiritual redemption, intimately connected to our human lives, our existence, and our experience. The Christmas story is not only a celebration of Christ's birth but an invitation into hope and unity for everyone.

Are you ready for the light of Christ to shine in your life? Are you ready to leave darkness behind and walk into the light of love and life?

AMEN