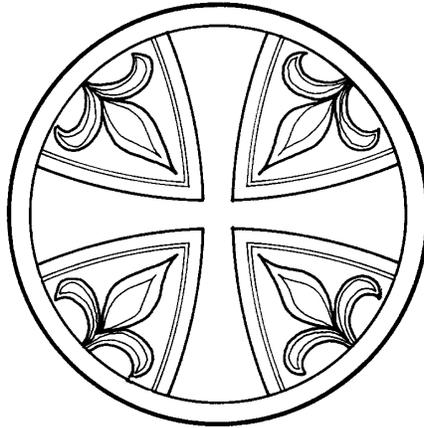


**REV. STEPHANIE
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SERMON**



December 24, 2010

Christmas Eve 2010
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

Jesus Has Left the Building

Christmas... Christmas...

Never has a word been spoken that can mean so many things to so many people. I mean we have words like aloha and shalom that carry a variety of meanings, but the words themselves are fairly neutral.

But Christmas is very different; Christmas is a word that has the power to draw forth hope, love, and excitement, or despair, anger, and depression. Why the very mention of Christmas can even begin a war of words over political correctness.

I personally don't imagine that Christ really cares whether we say Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays; I don't really remember him being a stickler for such things. He seemed far more concerned about how we care for one another than whether or not we knew the greeting du jour.

He was more interested in freeing God's people than arguing over manger scenes at public buildings. I personally don't think he'd object to us using his special day as an occasion to include all peoples and all faiths in our seasonal greeting routine.

But know that no matter where this night finds any of us on the emotional, spiritual, or political correctness scale, whether Christmas is a time of joy or a time of sadness, whether worship is a weekly occurrence or we're just testing the waters, tonight we are all gathered here as the family of God. We are all the same in God's eyes and we all come here with the same desire to enter into the wonder of this Holy night.

We come here on this wonderful and mysterious night to celebrate the astounding event that God in Christ came to dwell with us. We can marvel once again at the depth of God's love for all of God's people and rejoice that God will come to us again.

But let's face it; the pressure generated around Christmas these days can make this a hard time of the year. I'm willing to bet that sitting among us tonight are some families or a couple or two who have found themselves in petty arguments that are made a little bit more intense by the pressure of the season.

There are probably a few of you having Christmas celebrations for the first time with a new blended family--- and you are praying with all of your might that things will go well, but in the meantime the stress of it is making you crazy.

Maybe some of you are feeling the pain of old arguments that have never been resolved and the holidays just seem to open up old wounds you'd rather forget. So let's just admit that amid the joy there are moments when we smile and say, "Merry Christmas" even as we ache inside and wonder, if in the end, the birth of this miraculous baby has anything to do with us at all.

And the good news my friends is--- that the answer is yes, yes, yes, *a thousand times yes!* This is *precisely* the miracle of Emmanuel, the miracle of our God who has chosen to be *with* us.

God chose to bring us God's love *in the flesh*. The infinite, unknowable Creator of all things chooses out of infinite, boundless love to be born of a poor woman-child, to be raised by a humble carpenter and draw his first breath in a stable filled with straw and most likely a cow, a goat and a sheep or two.

So often we can get lost in despair because we feel we must somehow be perfect or have perfect lives in order to be worthy of God's love. We think we must ascend to a state of some undefiled holiness in order to rise to God's presence.

But on this night, in this child, our God says, my people, my children, it is I who will come to you. I come to you in a stable, I come to you in the crowded mall, I come to you in the busy-ness of your own making, I come to you in the midst of family stress and I especially will come to you in your grief, your pain, and your imperfections.

Emmanuel, which means God with us, really means God with us *everywhere*, in any condition we may find ourselves in. In our happiness or sorrow, in glory or disgrace, God *never* abandons us. From his birth to his death God in Christ laughed, cried, suffered, grieved. Why, he's even had pitched arguments with members of his family--- just like us.

There is no situation in our lives no matter how secret or hidden, how embarrassing, or shameful that is beyond the reach of God's love. Our God comes to us in the flesh and heals us and makes us whole.

"Be not afraid" God's messengers tell us, for tonight I bring you news of great joy! You have been given freedom---freedom from fear, freedom from death, and freedom from all the ways the world might tell you that you are not good enough to receive God's love.

As we sit here tonight, let's resolve to put our "Christmas stress" aside and allow the true mystery and joy of this season penetrate our hearts and minds. Know that the Prince of Peace, born so long ago and far away is *still* among us.

In the middle of all the chaos, boredom, and craziness of everyday life, hold fast to the good news that we always have access to Christ's joy, love, and peace, ----not just sometimes, but always---not just when we deserve it, but *always*.

You see the real truth is that Jesus is no longer in this manger where we celebrate him on this night. I think we sometimes think of him as frozen there, but he cannot be contained. Jesus has left the building! Even as we worship him in the manger he is already out and at work bringing light into the darkest and most painful of places.

Not only that, we must remember tonight that he is also moving through even the most mundane and ordinary aspects of our lives. He is with us in those petty arguments urging us to forgiveness and laughter instead. And he is holding us close in the tension of making multiple families into one, and he is especially with us in those places of deep sadness working to comfort us when we feel the most lonely, imperfect, and afraid.

So my friends, I believe the Good News to remember is this: No matter what Christmas calls out in us, no matter what the word has come to mean, what is worth hanging our hat on is this mysterious Truth: God in Christ *comes to us*.

God in Christ comes to us not just tonight, but again and again and again in the midst of all this crazy, busy, and broken world has to offer. He does not need manger scenes at public buildings; he does not require perfect families or even perfect worship. All he needs is for us to turn and see him standing there with us and then for us welcome him and make a place for him in the depths of our hearts.

On this night, just as God's prophet Isaiah proclaimed:

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined... For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace."

So tonight let's celebrate the knowledge that this child is Emmanuel, that this glorious child is now and forever God with us. Amen.

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