

The stuff of Christmas

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

A Collect for Christmas Eve, Book of Common Prayer, p. 212

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST: CHRISTMAS EVE

Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 98, Titus 3:4-7, Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2016

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

There's a lot of "stuff" in Christmas.

Especially as we sit here this evening, a lot of us – probably all of us – have been managing all the

stuff (and I mean *a lot* of stuff) to be ready for Christmas.

A lot of it is wonderful – like that Christmas tree that the Agin Brothers wrestled in here, or the

wreaths that someone up in Oregon made, that the Altar Guild members got here and hung up, the bows they tied, the deep red poinsettias that were grown especially for St. Mark's this year.

We can all add to the list, though – the cards, the decorating at home, the gifts and wrapping and shipping, the cooking and baking, entertaining, finding the ugliest ugly sweater or something chic to wear to a party. Jill Bader had to find the antlers and Rudolf nose for her car....

There's a lot of stuff in Christmas.

And its delightful and tiring, creative and expensive, brings us together and makes us feel lonely...

And usually, at some point, we wonder if all the stuff is distracting us from what Christmas is about – that maybe we need to get "back" to the "true meaning" of Christmas (make Christmas great again). And it often seems like getting to that true meaning would involve getting rid of all the stuff – that we would be spiritual and not materialistic at Christmas.

So now we're here and we come to the Christmas story, hear it from scripture – from Luke – so familiar....

But then, looking again, the Christmas story is *more stuff*.

Rulers, government officials, government policies, a trudging journey – a migration with other

people and the hardness of travel, Mary's pregnant body, her labor and delivery in a stable, a manger, the cloth that Mary used to wrap her son, shepherds, sheep...

So what it comes down to is: there's no Christmas without stuff....

And at the heart of it is the flesh and blood of Jesus, the stuff of his body – in the way we have bodies – and God choosing to show God's presence in all of the cold, hard facts of actual living – in and with all the rest of the stuff of life.

Truthfully, the faith life, the spiritual life as revealed in Jesus, that we receive anew Christmas after Christmas, is a materialistic life. Even contemplative practice is a matter of being present in the physicality of a human body that breathes air, that comes to awareness in an actual space with sounds and scents and in that space is able to encounter, connect with, come alive to God who is always in the actual world of created things.

So even when we are being most spiritual, it can't be done without being in our bodies and our bodies being in God.

So Christmas (not just this Christmas, not just your Christmas and how things have gone so far this year for you...) Christmas has been a materialistic holiday from the very beginning.

For all of us, it tells us that there is no spiritual life separate

from flesh and blood, from the shape and form, the cellular structure of creation.

And that God is in all of it – or more clearly – all of it is in God. God is with us constantly – and not in some theoretical, dogmatic, doctrinal, churchy way.

My friend, the monk James Koester who is the Superior of our monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts writes: “Christmas is a feast of the senses! It is a celebration of our ability to see and know and taste and touch the power and glory and revelation of God. It is not just about a birth that happened long, long ago and far, far away. It is about the way in which God manifests [God’s] self to us in the person of Jesus as friend and food and hope and love. It is a celebration of our ability to grasp [God] and to sense God with all our being.”

Fr. Richard Rohr, one of the most important teachers and writers of our day says it this way: “Henceforth humanity has the right to know that it is good to be human, good to live on this earth, good to have a body because God in Jesus chose and said ‘yes’ to our humanity.”

I think of Mary, the mother of Jesus as we see her this night, who offered her body to bear this child. Mary had no support or approval from any official organization or person. There was no

“explanation.” Pregnancy is never theoretical. In bearing a child, what she agreed to do was outside the bounds of her society and religion. She is full of questions about her own life, about the life of her child, about both the present and the future – scripture says she “treasured” and “pondered” these questions – but what it came down to in the manger was doing what she saw to do, wrapping her child in bands of cloth and laying him in a manger to sleep – a specific, physical action involving specific things in the world – the next thing she saw to do with the “stuff” of that first Christmas around her.

For Mary, Christmas wasn’t a *conversation* about religion.

It sometimes seems like we only expect God is present or active when something magical or mysterious is happening and we spatialize God as being up or at a distance or otherwise removed until we meet certain conditions, say a prayer in a certain way, or think thoughts that are clever, or say ingenious things we read in a book or heard on a TV show.

Actually, everything that is real, all the time is God.

Another of my monk friends, Brother Mark Brown, said it like this: “The Spirit of God animates us, but it all happens in the flesh: every deed of kindness, every act of generosity, every word of encouragement happens in the

flesh. Every embodiment of Christ's grace or truth or love happens in the flesh—or it doesn't happen."

There is no question that we live our lives in the midst of real challenge and complexity, whether we are thinking of our lives personally, our local communities, our families and friends – or the larger world with its constantly threatening politics, violence and upheavals.

The humanity Jesus was born into was not an idealized experience. It was a life of poverty, of dirt and grit and hard work, physical challenge and pain, betrayal, abuse and death and all of the questions and uncertainties that we all know and God was in all of it.

God is with us in large experiences and small ones – when we might expect God and when we don't – when we think we're full of faith and when we don't have any sense of God at all.

So the lasting gift of Christmas is not getting spiritual.

Having Christmas every day is getting in touch with stuff – paying attention to what is really real in your life and in life large-scale, what is happening in the world. Christmas after the tree and ornaments are put away is being awake to where you are and the humans who are inhabiting the space with you – and not just the ones who seem to be most like you. Christmas is imagining the

potential of the things you encounter, being in awe of how they came into the world and what they contribute to your life and life generally.

Christmas is taking action, wrapping the baby and putting him in the manger or doing anything and everything you can do with your particular gifts in whatever way you can, stepping into the opportunities to embody the spirit of life and make a contribution in some way that may seem insignificant or may, in fact, be a grand move.

Christmas is saying yes to being – being that *is* you and being that is coming towards you as a gift. You can trust that if it's real, God is in it and in you and there's a relationship in progress.

No one was bored or tuned out in the manger – not Jesus, not Mary, not Joseph; the shepherds were alert and attentive, later the magi – all ready for the next move, all showing up with and in and as the stuff of Christmas. That's what made it Christmas.

And if Christmas is anything, it is us showing up with and in and as the stuff of real life we're living every day – and we'll know, we will discern in flesh and blood and action that God is with us and there is a creating, enlivening, eternal heart of love beating in us, among us all, and in the whole creation all the time.