

WHAT CHRISTMAS WILL YOU GIVE YOURSELF THIS YEAR?

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.

A Collect for Christmas Eve, The 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

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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.

What Christmas will you give
yourself this year?

Do you want a perfect

Christmas? Perhaps a "merry little
Christmas," like the song says?

We get used to hearing the

Christmas story as we have just heard it from the gospel according to Luke, and it sounds lovely because we associate it with the surroundings in which we typically hear it... – but here's the story:

A whole religious minority is dominated and displaced, exiled by a foreign occupying power in order to count and tax those locals more efficiently. There's the hardship of the journey itself – especially with Mary's pregnancy; surely people, kinfolk of Mary and Joseph became ill, were injured, or died along the way. Displaced refugees are crowded out of shelter. Jesus is born in no particular place, in a barn or stable or cave, in poverty on the margins of the known world. Fear is a given for the little family, for those who come in contact with them, like the shepherds – for everyone except the angels and animals.

Even Mary in the story is fearful, questioning, pondering. She has to wrestle with what she encounters – with what accosts her in all these unfolding events... wrestling that will continue to unfold and challenge her all the way to the crucifixion.

So if you want to give yourself or the world a perfect Christmas, a merry little Christmas, then it isn't going to be much like *actual* Christmas.

No one is charmed in this

story. There was nothing about being merry in it – nothing little. Big and messy, more like it.

On looking at it more closely, it sounds a lot like life we know or know about. And it sounds like this year that we've just lived through that has had a lot of instability, uncertainty, fear, irrational violence, natural disasters, all the way up to our recent fires. And that's just the public side of it; we've all had our personal challenges at the same time.

A central point of the unideal story is God embracing unideal humanity in the ways we actually live. God doesn't come to us primarily as who we want to be, or think we should be, or are trying to be, but as we really are.

This Christmas story and the stories each of us can or do tell about our own lives have the same drawbacks and more than a little of the unappealing, unlivable reality that Mary and Joseph and Jesus encountered in the stable and the manger – including the excrement that goes with that territory.

God enters the world then and now in imperfect conditions – peopled by our imperfect lives, our imperfect families and friends, our imperfect communities, our imperfect world.

This is where God – all of God – wanted and wants to live. *Does* live.

Can we give ourselves, and receive for the world, an imperfect Christmas for imperfect us?

A little closer to home, and it may be too late to mention this, Christmas does not depend on the details of our decorating, gift giving, of who is or is not at a table, the mood of one person or another; it is not dependent on a feeling – including “having the Christmas spirit.”

What Christmas will you give yourself this year? Which is to say: what Christmas will you allow, accept into your life this year?

In that stable, in that manger, in the midst of the animals, the shepherds, the angels, the confusion, the unfamiliarity, the fear, the sheer physical feat of being there, we have the possibility of a Christmas that includes, perhaps improbably, or counterintuitively, **heaven**.

Not heaven in the future, not an afterlife, not the sweet by and by.

At Christmas, God is offering real world *heaven* here and now.

The elements are simple: the presence of God, the presence of human beings in the created, natural world. And in that presence, the *union* of people and God, the union of people with one another *in* God. God’s undying love for us, for all of humanity, that forms that union and makes our

love for one another possible and real. That’s heaven. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself is not a religion, it is life, revealed in a particular way that, ideally, we can see in a clear way at Christmas in the real world, not in some ethereal, theoretical world.

Christmas is a chance to see what is always true: there is no place for anyone to go that is away from God – though how we experience that presence of reality and the language we use to discuss it varies widely.

Christmas is a holiday within the Christian tradition now, but it was always meant for everyone, for the world. There was no “Christian tradition” at the first Christmas. If God can be born in poverty and sleep on hay in a manger, God can inhabit anywhere, any life, any time – and does. All of humanity is the reason for God’s taking on human flesh and living vulnerably as one of us.

So we have the gift of imperfect Christmas in our own imperfect lives, and with heaven breaking in, sacred union we share with the whole world, with all people in all places, Christmas for people of all faiths or none.

I hope the Christmas we “give ourselves” this year opens onto the oneness that is our true heritage and home and that we can discover new ways to embrace one another,

new ways to live in empathy, to include, and to build life-giving, resilient communities, whose hallmark is compassion: again, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

This Christmas has the potential within it of being a gift that keeps giving through ongoing contemplative prayer or meditation practice – and there are many options. While transformation in hope and possibility can happen suddenly and unexpectedly, sometimes, paradoxically, through deeply painful or troubling events, it mostly comes through what reality we regularly allow in our lives. Through the year, may Christmas be continually more and more a reality in our lives and in the world as we continually awaken to the presence of the sacred within and among us day by day, and throughout each day.

Have yourself a merry little Christmas?

No, give yourself (welcome into your life) an imperfect, immense, pervasive, big, messy Christmas, shared in the full generosity of love that does not know death, [shared] with every person on earth and with the whole creation – and embrace the experience of that Christmas every day, all year long.



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