

The morning after

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, December 25, 2011:
The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Christmas Day.
Based on John 1:1-14.*

Christmas morning feels different from Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve is full of romance and sparkle, tinsel and ribbons still in place. I used to say it was a great date night. My conclusion, non-scientific but pretty learned, if I do say so myself, is that more couples get engaged on Christmas Eve than on any other night of the year. It is magic, but it is a different story on Christmas morning. This morning is more footed pajamas and bed hair, tinsel all askew and mounds of ripped up paper and bows. I like them both, love them even; but the morning is more intimate, even if less romantic, all about the people who are closest in the world to us. Who else would we allow to see us in footed pajamas or big puppy dog slippers?

But it is more than that: on Christmas Day, we can see a little clearer, beholding Christmas more squarely in the face, the Incarnation today a bit more grown-up, hope a little more circumscribed, arguably a sad claim, but also one that is more sustainable. On Christmas morning and certainly by the afternoon, we know that all that is to be—the fullness of time in god speak—remains a ways off; but what has come, the Light of Christmas, is more than enough to carry us through that which is yet to be known.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

In this extraordinarily poetic outburst, John stakes his claim from the first words of his prologue: the one whose coming we celebrate today is the one for whom the world has been waiting, coming humbly and quietly in the form of a child but as one who has co-existed with God for eternity, now having arrived as the light of the world, hope shining in the darkness, the Prince of Peace, the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings.

On Christmas Day, we have the honesty to admit that these words and the chapters that follow have not always been bearers of peace; an exquisitely beautiful opening, lyrical and lofty, for sure—but when read without the benefit of nuance and context, have brought results that have not always been kind. But for today—this holiest of days for us—we give only the slightest nod to such historical and structural scholarship, choosing to rejoice in the truth that *for us* this is the story of all stories, the story that most opens *our* hearts and minds to the reality of God. The power of our faith is that we can be bold in such extravagant claims without the need of being exclusive or triumphal. No one has to be wrong for this to be our day, our beginning, our claim that the light shines among us, a light that in some mysterious way lingers to this day in our hearts and even more outrageously is connected to Jesus, a tiny baby, poor, unadorned without benefit of home or resources, occupying space offered by strangers. How others receive the light of God is their story, but this is ours; and when we truly embrace the light and hope of *this* message, it opens our hearts to people of all stories and becomes our window into the universal love of a God way too big to be contained.

One evening last week about 300 people gathered on the steps of St. Bart's to sing Christmas carols. It was one of those marvelous New York moments when stony New York faces were transformed; it is almost impossible to sing *Joy to the World* without a hint of happiness, and it is patently impossible to sing *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* with a protective and unemotional glaze. It was silly and sentimental and simply wonderful. One thing that made it so meaningful was that we all knew that the

light shining among and within us—every one of us—was much less about believing than about hoping. Believing was so not the point. It was a moment filled with hope, hope shining in the darkness of a winter night, shining as bright and joyfully as day.

Hope, both its presence and its absence, shapes our lives. There is nothing better in the world than being around a person of hope, and there is nothing sadder than knowing someone without hope. One exudes life; the other awaits death. With genuine hope, hope that is not dependent upon outcome to remain hopeful, there is no set of circumstances that cannot be faced, no darkness too dark to penetrate, no events too sad to survive, no dilemma too complicated to resolve. Hope like that, which is what lives as a light among a great darkness, is not living falsely or naïvely; such hope, in fact, shines a bright light on reality and replies simply and profoundly that there is nothing in this world that can separate us from the love of God. Jesus came, not as a self-help guru or a magic fix-it man, but as a beacon of light and hope that reminds us that all can be well even when nothing is.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Grace and truth—the companions of Christmas, the gifts borne by the Incarnation. Somehow God lives among us, even now, not a singular moment in time but a divine insistence that life with God is better—truer, more filled with grace—inevitably better than a life we can imagine or concoct on our own. No wonder we have been inspired through the years to “go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.” Our truth, as we grow to understand it and allow it to shape our lives, teaches us that what we share, what our evangelical impulsive is truly about is not doctrine but love, love that is as pure and simple as a little child’s love and as complex as an ethic of life, a way of being and loving in the world.

And on Christmas Day, when the frenetic haze of it all clears just a bit, we realize once again Christmas has come, has come again to convert us, to remind us that grace and truth belong to the whole world, and that in the mystery of the continuing Incarnation of God, we bear the message—the message of hope and goodness and generosity.

Merry, merry Christmas, my friends. Goodness has come again and lives among us. *Amen.*

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