



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Emmanuel! God with us!

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 25, 2014*

*The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Christmas Day, Based on John 1:1-14*

Last week I was emailing with a colleague about a time for a phone meeting this week. We were doing a dance...will you be in the office, I asked. She asked if I wouldn't be too busy given my work. And finally she wrote that she would be available for a call Tuesday around 9 o'clock in the morning before her young adult children "wake up from the luxury sleep of the holidays." The phrase "luxury sleep of the holidays" caused a wave of nostalgia to crash into my life as I remembered lazy holidays and just youthful ability to sleep past 9 o'clock in the morning. The holiday season is ripe with opportunities for nostalgia. Remembering happy times.

A friend of mine who is a playwright, Stan Richardson, once wrote that nostalgia's an interesting thing because it's "all about endings, all about drawing conclusions and assigning meaning swiftly before even the tiniest doubt can occur to you and the pretty moment is overtaken by mystery. Because, you see, Nostalgia hates Mystery. Mystery is this bubble of air in the decal on your car window that just can't be pushed out. Nostalgia loves Tragedy. Meaning!, a lesson!, a return to the rightful order!, and a forced atonement! Tragedy afflicts only some. But Mystery—which is ancient and messy, which knows too much about us and is entirely uninterested in forgiveness—Mystery affects us all."

Christmas is all about mystery. No hidden meanings, no lessons to learn, the rightful order is upended. Virgins give birth, Angels sing to Shepherds, a king is born in the stable because there is no room in the inn. There is no atonement in Christmas, just astonishment and wonder.

For you see Christmas is, in the words of Gustavo Gutierrez, "the irruption of God into human history: an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world; an irruption that smells of the stable."

The writer of the letter to the Philippians states that although Jesus "was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave being born" into the human family. God who is everything becomes nothing, and in becoming nothing he opens the space for humanity to become everything.

Nostalgia looks back and judges the present by comparing it to a remembered past that always looks better than it actually was. It is passive, wishful, and it is based on a half-truth. Mystery embraces the messiness of the present and looks forward in hope. Hope is not easy. Hope is active and creative (from *The Rakes Progress* by Stan Richardson).

Think for moment about the issue of race relations in America. Things have never been better. I know how bad it is now, but the past was a whole lot worse; and we didn't talk about it, and many of us didn't even know how bad it was. In the past, tribes of people stayed far away from each other, and when they didn't, they went to war. One people conquered another and strong measures were necessary to maintain order. Order was maintained through brutal repression, as in Nazi Germany or South Africa during apartheid, or more subtly as in the United States of America, where order was mostly maintained through discrimination and denial of economic resources. No matter how bad things are now, they are not as bad as they once were and in fact they have never been better. It is much harder to hear that Good News than it is to look back and remember a time before we were aware of the effects of systemic racism that plagues our society.

Two thousand fourteen has personally been a tough year for me. My father continues to become more and more forgetful. This year he even forgot my birthday. More friends have died this year than any other year since the height of the AIDS epidemic, and my marriage has dissolved. Last night as I headed home from midnight Mass to an empty apartment for the first time in many years, the bleak mid winter never seemed bleaker. And so I turned to Facebook.

Always a risky proposition, turning to Facebook when one is feeling bleak. You should not try this at home. People generally post things on Facebook when their lives are happy, and to the bleak that can make things seem even bleaker.

Immediately a message popped up on the messenger from a man who lives in New Jersey and whom I didn't think was my friend on Facebook. I know him well because he has a son who lives on the streets of Manhattan. I have known them since 2007 when the father called the agency where I used to work and asked for help. He reaches out to me from time to time when he is worried because his son hasn't been in contact, and often he reaches out during the holidays. His son has both schizophrenia and drug addiction and is one of the few people I have never honestly been able to connect with. This failure to connect is really a failure of imagination and hope on my part. The son is very bright and always well behaved and yet is so far gone that he reminds me that hope is not always easy. After coming to St. Bart's I encouraged the son to come in to my office as often as he could to just to give his dad a call.

I shuddered as I clicked on the message, thinking about having to call the father and admit that I had not seen his son for a long, long time and—what is worse—I hadn't even noticed. Turns out that the father found me on Facebook and reached out to me because he had good news to share. His beloved son has entered into a permanent residential treatment program and has been there for more than a year. All of a sudden, through the mystery of connection, hope was renewed in my heart and the bleak midwinter night was not so bleak.

When we understand Christmas nostalgically, remembering the past better than it may have been, we are left feeling empty and hollow and powerless. We complain about commercialism even as we wonder what we are going to get. When we engage with the present and try to make the present better for others, we experience the mystery of Christmas. The Gospel of John has it that "God became flesh and lived among us." The phrase "lived among us" literally means God set up his tent in our midst. He came down from heaven and lives with us. This is not something that happened once a long time ago and ended in 12 days or 33 years. This is not something that we nostalgically remember and recreate through Christmas memories or even truces that last for 24 hours. The mystery of Christmas is not about the past at all. The mystery of Christmas is God with us, Emmanuel; he is still with us. Even in our darkest hours.

God who is everything becomes nothing, and in becoming nothing he opens the space for humanity to become everything. The mystery of Christmas is that we are no longer trying to get God to be happy with us and hopefully take us to heaven when we die. Instead, God lives in the midst of us and calls us to view the world with divine astonishment and wonder, to reach out to others and connect with them and create heaven here on earth. Emmanuel! God is with us! Merry Christmas!