

Sermon on Christmas Day
St. James Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California
December 25, 2006
By The Rev. Mary Moore Gaines

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4; Luke 2:1-20

And the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, and we behold his glory

The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, with our great emphasis on the Incarnation – the Eternal Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us – could be called *The Christmas Church*. The Incarnation is the bedrock of our faith. We know however that many who respect Christianity as a noble cause, a moral force, and/or the major religion of Western civilization balk at the Incarnation.

What causes them to balk is the concept of Emmanuel, *God with us*. The idea that the Creator of galaxies and suns and planets in their courses, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the uncaused First Cause, the Ineffable, the Unutterable *is born* a human being? Impossible! Yes, and this is our story, and we are sticking to it! The glorious impossible!

Explain it? We can't. Experience it? Yes! With grace, presence and an open heart, we can and do experience God with us, among us, loving us in and through Jesus the Christ. Year after year, with God's grace, we move into an ever-deepening and more beautiful experience of this holy mystery.

The Incarnation is better approached by poets than by theologians, by the heart than by the head. For ages theologians have stammered to capture it and fail. Phrases like the Unlimited has become limited; the Undifferentiated has become differentiated; the Undefined has become defined; the Infinite has become finite; the Unfocused has become focused; the Invulnerable has become vulnerable just don't capture the fullness of the mystery.

Hear the heart approach. St. Augustine, a great theologian, was using his heart with these words about the Incarnation: *If nobody asks me about it, I know. If I want to explain it to somebody, I do not know.*

To experience the Incarnation, God with us, we must show up, be present and open to the story, marveling along with the shepherds. We will bring our gifts with awe and reverence. We will be speechless at this one moment when all the world is a "thin place," where glory shines through and God is met in earthly time. Stay with the story. The truth is in the story.

There are two more realities to put alongside the reality of the Incarnation on this Christmas Day. First, there is a counter-miracle taking place here. As we gather here in

our Church, with millions around the world in other churches, to receive the baby, to welcome, to embrace him, the Word made flesh, to sing, “O come, let us adore him!” something else is happening at the same time. While we are receiving the babe, the babe is also receiving us. God comes to us so that we might come to God. God takes on our humanity so that we might assume some of God’s divinity.

In the 13th century, Meister Eckhart expressed it this way, *What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the creator to give birth to his son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and in my culture?*

Sue Monk Kidd in *From When the Heart Waits* writes about her visit to a monastery around Christmas years ago. She passed a monk walking outside the church and said ‘Merry Christmas.’ And the monk replied, ‘May Christ be born in you,’ She thought that a very peculiar greeting at the time and never forgot it . . . The moment affirmed to her what the real essence of spiritual transformation is all about. It is realizing more of our inner Christ-nature, about discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart. . . . as the birthing begins, the soul becomes a nativity. The whole Bethlehem pageant starts up inside us.

The second reality is the darkness of the world in which the light of the holy birth shines. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* John 1:5.

Author John Shea tells of a Christmas card he will send one day with the message, *Have a Defiant Christmas!* When his friends ask him “Jack, what is this about,” he will explain how we have to defy the darkness of the world to celebrate Christmas, the coming of the light in the midst of a dark world. There is so much darkness, barrenness, fear and inhospitality in our lives and in the world. How can we celebrate in such a world? How can we celebrate and still be present to the darkness?

Christian tradition speaks powerfully and consistently to the question “How can we celebrate and still be present to the darkness?” The answer is that the soul is deeply united to God and if we can make ourselves conscious of this soul in us, it will be a place where we can stand to defy all the things that try to tear us down and destroy us. The challenge, the journey, is to be more and more deeply in touch with our interconnectedness with the Divine Source, with God.

Meister Eckhart once said that each person has a vintage wine cellar. However, we seldom drink from it, because we have to find the wine cellar before we can drink from it.

St. Paul says, “We carry the treasure in earthen vessels.” The earthen vessels are us.

In 1513 Fra Giovanni wrote, “I salute you and there is nothing I can give which you have not, but there is much, while I cannot give it, you may take it:

No heaven can come to you unless you find it in your hearts today. So take heaven.

No joy can come to you, unless it comes to you in this present moment. Take joy.

No peace can come to you, unless you find it right now. Take peace.”

On this Christmas Day, and every day, experience and rejoice in the Incarnation, Pray that for you, for us and for the whole world, the light of Christ continues to shine in the darkness, now and forever, and that, God with us, we may be bearers of that light.

Merry Christmas! May Christ be born in you, in us and in all the world.