

Christmas 1, Yr C, 12-27-09
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All Saints Episcopal Church

"Fast away the old year passes, fa la la la la, la la la la"

It seems like only yesterday that we were celebrating Christmas Day - well, it was practically yesterday! It's only the 4th day of Christmas - 8 more to go - and for many of Christmas is virtually over. The piles of bare trees to be recycled began to form on Christmas afternoon and are growing exponentially. Ornaments have been boxed and put back in the attic. Gifts have been returned or exchanged, and - maybe not quite so odd for our weather - bathing suits are already in the stores, anticipating the next season just a wee bit early.

It's as if we imagine this birth story to be like almost all other birth stories taking place in our Western world today: we go to the hospital, check in to be cared for by nice, smiling nurses in cute scrubs with pink babies and storks all over them. We unpack our overnight bag in a large birthing room, where there is plenty of room for flowers, balloons, spouses, grandparents, videocameras, ribbons and cute siblings of the soon-to-be-born. Everything is very clean, if not totally sterile. Everything is monitored and measured. There are plenty of blankets in case we get cold. And there is plenty of light for everyone to see what they are doing. After a few contractions and maybe a little pain which is relieved by drugs, we deliver a baby into the experienced arms of the doctor, who hands the baby over to the pediatrician and nurses to clean the baby up, give him his first test score and then ooh and ahhh over what a strong cry or what a full head of hair or what a beautiful little mouth she has.

After a short time of recovery, the baby is brought back to us. We hold her...lots of pictures are taken. Someone brings us a hot meal on a tray. Friends start to call. The next day, we go home with our baby in our lap as if everything was no big deal. Well, it was a big deal! Bringing a new life into the world is miraculous...it is a thing

of wonder...of awe. Have we become so used to the ways of our world that we have lost our sense of awe?

I am certain that for Mary and Joseph, everything was a big deal. No smiling nurses in bright scrubs. No clean room...in fact, no proper room at all. No monitors. Nothing to ease the pain. No one to explain to Mary what was happening or what to expect. No grandparents or flowers or pediatricians. No blankets. Just animals. And animal noises. And animal smells. Dirt. Hay. Cold. And darkness.

In Jim's sermon on Christmas Eve, he talked about the fact that many of us are afraid of the dark. When I was little, I was very afraid of it. When I was a teenager with a room in the semi-finished attic of our house, the only one up there, I was afraid then, too. I imagined all sorts of creatures coming out from under the eaves of the roof and making their way through my closet and into the room with me. I knew in my head that it couldn't be true, but because there was no light up there, I could not be sure. To this day, if I am watching a movie that is full of scary things happening in the dark, my heart pounds and I have to cover my face or leave the room.

In the darkness of our world, we have many other fears as well. There are many times in our lives when fear or worry can get the best of us. To some people, my fear or your fear may seem totally unfounded or insignificant, but when we are in the midst of them, they can be very real and overwhelming. We fear the unknown...illness or loss of health...losing a job...losing our money. We fear for our children and for their future. Others fear for their lives...fear a life of hunger and disease...of homelessness...of being marginalized.

But the message of the angels - to Zechariah and Elizabeth, to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds, to us, to the whole world - the message is "be not afraid." Live without fear. God has come among us in the flesh.

It's that simple. But we all usually have to hear things and see things and do things in lots of different ways before we 'get it' - so we read and hear not only the

Christmas stories of Luke or Matthew on Christmas Eve - we also read from the Gospel of John. Totally different to our ears and eyes. No shepherds, no manger, no angels, no animals in the barn, not even a hint of wise men - just a lot of complicated-sounding phrases:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...And the Word became flesh and lived among us...

Words of poetry and power to be sure. Words we recognize because they are always the same words to be read on Christmas Day and the first Sunday after Christmas in all three lectionary years. But they are not the words of Christmas pageants and children in bathrobes and tinsel. They are words of strength...and light...a light that overcomes darkness, that shows us that we do not have to be afraid.

Jesus...the Word...Logos...Wisdom...with God...was God...Son of God...Emmanuel... God with us. Jesus bringing light to the world...casting away the works of darkness...light from light eternal. And beyond these lofty words and phrases, the Word which became flesh spoke words which took on flesh as well. Jesus not only spoke about a God of mercy and forgiveness, he offered that forgiveness to a frightened, shamed woman standing alone with a pile of stones left around her, and offered it to his friend Peter at a second charcoal fire. Jesus not only spoke about God's reign of justice, he stood in solidarity with the poor and the outcasts. He not only spoke about a God who longs for our wholeness, but his touch brought clean skin to a leper, a stooped woman to straightness. He not only said, "I love you," to the hungry crowd, but fed their hungers with truth and with bread. He didn't just say, "I love you," to each of us, but picked up a cross, suffered, died our death, and rose that we might know eternal life. (Sr. Joan Delaplaine)

Jesus came to be one of us, to live with us, to live like us, and to teach us how to live like him. Now we are the ones who are enfleshed. It is our turn to bring flesh to Jesus' words, to bring light to the world, to cast out fear, to offer forgiveness, to stand in solidarity with the poor and outcast, to bring wholeness and healing, to feed the hungry, to say, "I love you" to our neighbor. We've already promised to do that through our baptismal vows; as a community of faith we give flesh to those vows.

In a few minutes we will baptize *Anna Grace Brown* and *Billy Glen Parsons, III*. Every baptism is the very embodiment of the coming of Christ. These children will be marked with the sign that makes them part of the body of Christ. Our job is to teach them what it means to be the body, to teach them how to be the body to others, and to renew once again our own commitment to be the body.

I still remember a Christmas card I got last year. It was not your typical cute Santa or snowman or even a stained-glass-Mary gazing down on her little boy, but rather a profound statement about what it means to be the body of Christ. It is a poem by Howard Thurman (1899-1981) called 'The Work of Christmas:'

When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins -
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To teach the nations,
To bring Christ to all,
To make music in the heart.

May God fill your heart with love this Christmas, and may that love set you free to accept God's gifts of light and hope and peace. AMEN.