

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Monday, December 24, 2007

Christmas Eve

Sermon Text: John 1 (selected verses)

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

First of all, Merry Christmas! Isn't it wonderful to be able to greet one another with those happy words, words of faith, words of joy, words of love, words from God? This Holy Night is upon us once again, and all the waiting is over, all the anticipation, and some have said all the horrible hymns of Advent, all the parties, all the shopping, the wrapping, the decorating. It's finally here, ready or not.

Why is it that we are so drawn to this night? There are probably as many answers to that question as there are people here. Some of you are here because you are believers. You are faithful followers of Jesus, and you want to be here to celebrate His birth. You come rejoicing in the name of Jesus, whom you love and worship, and we welcome you this night. Some of you are here because you once believed, and you would like to believe again. You come with memories of a time when life was less complex and more fun. Now, you long to be with God again to be whole, to reconnect with the one who is above all creation, yet at the same time in all creation. Well, in the name of Jesus, the one you long for, we welcome you this Holy Night.

Some of you are here because going to church on Christmas Eve just seems to be the right thing to do. It's what you and your family have always done on Christmas Eve, go to church, sing Christmas carols, enjoy the decorations, light the candles, and enjoy a family time. We are glad that you're here this evening. In the name of Jesus, who welcomes all, we welcome you this special Holy Night.

Some of you are here really against your wishes, but you honor the wishes of your family, your children, your parents, your grandparents, and so you come, and I respect and honor your honoring of your family with your time and attention this evening. In the name of Jesus, who loves us even when we do not love in return, we welcome you this Holy Night and pray that something this evening, something of God, will touch you.

To all of us, believers and would-be believers and those who aren't sure from one moment to the next, welcome! Welcome to the celebration that unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Yet there is something behind all of our reasons. I believe that Christmas attracts us because it is the story of God coming to us in such a simple and human and vulnerable way. Tonight we celebrate God's inventiveness and creativity. We celebrate that the age-old promise of a Savior has been fulfilled. We are amazed all over again at God's grace in becoming one of us, arriving in the ordinary way to become a part of creation.

You know the story, and that's why I didn't read it. That's part of the wonder and beauty of Christmas. It is the story of promise fulfilled that changed everything including us

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over time as we let the deep truth and the light of it sink into our souls. You’ve heard the story many times before. You know the vision, the promise, the prophet’s voice. You know how God used the secular rulers to call for the census to gather so many people into the little town of Bethlehem, the city of David, as had been predicted for the Savior’s birth. You know about the bands of cloth, and the manger, and the humble birth of our King of Kings. You know about the smelly shepherds, the lowliest of the low, startled by the angels as they watched over their sheep by night, and about their visit to the newborn, who was the Messiah, the one who fulfilled the promises of the prophets. We know the elements of the event, the nuances of the narrative. We know what happened, but more importantly, we know why it happened. That is the best part of the story.

This is the part of the story we need to tell and retell. Christ was born because God loved the world so much; God came to live among us. God became incarnate in that manger. The unbelievable, the totally unexpected, the never-to-be-guessed at happening was to fulfill the promise of the ages. God came to earth among the rest of creation as a tiny and vulnerable baby.

Now, most folks in that day expected the coming Savior would be a man of power and might, a soldier, a general, a leader, and he would drive out the oppressors, and he would free the captives, but instead of a ruler riding in ready to change everything, a baby arrived needing to be changed. Instead of a mighty warrior, a wailing baby came. Instead of human expectation, God came as a human infant, a tiny baby needing his mother to nurse him, to hold him, to cuddle him, to sing to him as he grew. A baby needing the protection of a loving set of parents, a child with a father, who taught him how to hammer and nail and read from the Torah.

Who would ever have guessed from the longtime promise of a Savior sent by God that the Savior would come in the form of a babe in arms? The amazing thing about God is that God turns our expectations upside down, over and over. That is the good news of great joy in this time of uncertainty, in this time of continuing war and rumors of war, in this period of steady decline in church attendance. I see tonight we’ve turned that around.

In this age when the individual is king or queen in the community means almost nothing. God sort of forced us into community, and here we are. Christmas is God saying to us, “I don’t want you to be afraid of me. I love you so much I make myself vulnerable. Even though I am all-powerful, I am not forcing anything upon you. In love I come to you as a helpless, defenseless baby, and I invite you to respond to my love. Do not be afraid, for see I am bringing you good news of joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Away up the hill from the direction of town came the sound of the newborn baby’s cry. In your imagination, can you hear it?

Merry Christmas to all of you as we once again hear God say I love you, I have come to you, I have given myself for you. Thanks be to God.

“The Light that Dwells Among Us”

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I'll close with this point. Christmas means He has come. He has made the night clear. He has made the night of our darkness, the night of our lack of understanding, the cruel night of our fears and our hopelessness into Christmas, a night of stars, a Holy Night. In the word made flesh, God has sent His word, His most profound word, His most beautiful word into the world, and that word means I love you, world and humanity. Let that light shine. Show us the way to peace and goodwill. Christmas means you are important. You are loved. You are not alone. You need not fear the dark. You are forgiven. You need not fear the light. Amen and amen.