

CHRISTMAS 1; YEAR C, December 27, 2009

We made it through another holiday season. This is the time when I usually take a deep breath, sigh, and think to myself, "Thank you, Lord, for helping me get through another Christmas." Now that the holiday has passed, things can finally get back to normal. The gifts have all been opened, the house has been cleaned up, the guests have come and gone, and there is nothing left to do. Things that didn't get done will have to wait til next year. All through the season of Advent, we prepared for Christmas. The holiday comes so fast, and, it seems, it's over, just as fast. I always get caught up in the rush and the push to get everything done, shopping, wrapping presents, decorating the house, hosting parties, and this year, I was expected to decorate my station at the shop, something I'm not used to doing. Something new got added to the routine of preparation. An extra party to host was also added to the already long list of preparations, and another party to attend just increased the pressure by about ten percent. Every year I tell myself I will start earlier, I will not try to do so much, I will be more organized. So much for my planning ahead. But like I said, it's all over now, and my life can get back to normal.

Life can get back to normal. Mary was told she was to conceive and bear a child, and he was to be named Jesus. As the events unfold, Mary comes to understand the significance of all that was told her. The angels appear to shepherds in the fields and announce the event, they seek out the child, to see for themselves and to affirm what was told them. They share their story with Mary and Joseph. The angels leave, the shepherds return to their flock, and life goes on. The night passes and a new day begins. But life is not the same, life is no longer normal. A child has been born, and life will never be the same. The story is told, and told again. Some will hear and believe, others will turn a deaf ear. Some will go and find out for themselves. God has come down from heaven. God, in Jesus, lives among His people. Lives with His people. Now the real work begins. To find the lost. To heal the broken. To feed the hungry. To rebuild the nations. To bring peace among people. To make music in the heart.

"In the beginning was the Word...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." That word, Word, is intended to remind us of how God went about establishing Creation "in the beginning." Remember that in Genesis, God speaks the Creation into being. So the Word made flesh is God's power of creating, becoming human. The Greek word is logos, which can mean both mind and heart. So, Word made flesh is also the mind and heart of God. God's creating power in mind and heart is embodied, then, in Jesus. The Incarnation. Incarnation: to enter into or become flesh. God, Incarnate. The Son of God became man in Jesus. "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." Not even the darkness of death.

In the Word made flesh, God takes on not only actual flesh but also and most importantly, the human condition. It is not "bodyness" alone that we are dealing with when we speak of Word made flesh. In Word made flesh, God declares that there is no squalor, no evil, no societal ill, no violence, nor despair, no darkness, no darkness, personal or corporate, that can extinguish the light of the Word made flesh, the light of Jesus Christ. The creative power of the mind and heart of God, through Jesus Christ, has come to dwell not only among us, but in us. God, among us, God with us, God, in us. In you, and in me.

These are very powerful words. God among us, in us. We can hear these words, we can believe these words, we can ponder them in our hearts. But then what? What do we do with this knowledge? This is where our work begins. We are to use this knowledge of God among us, to do God's work in His world. To find the lost. To heal

the broken. To feed the hungry. To rebuild the nations. To bring peace among people. To make music in the heart. This is a big job. It is a big responsibility. How do we begin? Where do we start? There is so much that has to be done, so much that needs to be fixed, so many people who are out of work, losing their homes, are going hungry. I have a job that is taking too many days, and hours that are too long. I want to go away on vacation, but the credit card bills are too high. People come to me and want more of my attention, but who is taking care of me? How can I go out into the world and do the work of the Lord? The job is way to much for me to handle, I'll just go back to bed and forget the whole thing. I just want my life to get back to normal; forget my neighbor, let him fend for himself. I close the bedroom door, climb into bed, pull the covers over my head, and then, I hear that still, small voice. "John, now that I have your attention, I just want to remind you that I am here. I'm God, and you're not. Rest. Relax. Pray. And when you're ready, I will send you out. But not until I have restored you." I am reminded that I can do nothing without God. And in the busyness of my life, I have forgotten to come back to God for his help and guidance. I get all caught up in the schedule, the routine of my day and my week, and I forget to take that little break, that little retreat from the world that helps me get my priorities straight. I forget that it is God who gives me the strength to do one more task. I forget that it is God who gives me life. It is God who is in charge, and not me. I have forgotten to pray, to commune with God.

We hear the wonderful Nativity Story of angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and the baby in the manger. We hear the message that God has come to live among us. We see cute Christmas cards with sentimental pictures of Mother and child. But what does it mean for us? What does it mean for you? What are we to do with this Good News? How are we to spread this Good News to the rest of the world? One day at a time. One person at a time. One neighbor at a time. We must be in touch with God to get our working orders. We can't go off into the world without some kind of plan, some kind of road map. The shepherds went back to their flocks. Mary went on with her life and raised the baby Jesus. Joseph and Mary escape danger and flee, with the baby, into Egypt. God is guiding them. We get through the Christmas holiday, and life goes on. The routine settles back down into the regular pace, the bills come at the end of the month, the sun goes down, the sun comes up, and another day begins. Pretty soon, we are back, fighting the schedule, trying to squeeze another minute into the day. News of a crisis hits us in the face. We struggle. We get busy, again, and forget to take that little break. We may forget that God is with us.

How do you know when God is speaking to you? Do you know when God is trying to communicate with you? Do you communicate with God? Are you in prayer, asking for guidance, and not getting any response? Are you at the end of that rope that everyone talks about? Are you out of patience with that disagreeable neighbor? How do you know if the Holy Spirit is truly leading and guiding you? For me, I start with prayer. I have to ask God what He wants for me. I have to start with Him. If He could come to us, in our place, and in our time, then I can look to him, through Jesus, the Christ Child, and get some kind of guidance on what to do and what to say, in any given situation. But I have to ask, in prayer, before I can move forward into the world, trying to do His work. The Church asks us, as faithful followers of Jesus, to go out into the world and spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. But, we cannot do that without first knowing Christ. We get baptized, we get confirmed, and then, we go on about our business, maybe even coming back to church every Sunday to worship. But life goes on. Bills have to be paid. The car breaks down and needs repair. We lose our jobs, or become disabled and can no longer work. Our retirement package takes a hit from Wall Street. Life gets tough, and we get worn out trying to survive. We make it through the month, but then, another month begins, and it's a struggle, all over again. As Christians, we are expected to do God's work in the world. We are to love one another. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We say we know the story. We say we believe. But do we

really understand the significance of God Among Us?

Christ came into the world for our salvation. Lately, with all the news of war in the Middle East, the global economy tanking, crime on the rise, and people getting stressed out over life in general, I hear more than a few people saying, "Wouldn't now be a good time for Jesus to come again?" Or, "John, do you believe that we are in the End Times?" That's always a good one to start a conversation, or end one. People are worried. People are stressed. People are caught up with a difficult life, a dangerous world. We need Jesus in the world, that's for sure. We need Christ in the world if we are to survive. We need Christ if we are to live. Will Jesus come again, soon? Will Jesus come today? Did Jesus ever leave?

Are you stressed over the way things are in life? Have you gotten yourself so busy that you have forgotten to ask Jesus for help? Have you forgotten what that still, small voice sounds like? Stop. Take a breath. Focus. Take a step back, just a bit. Come back to the manger. Seek out the Child. Seek the one that is spoken of by the angels. Look deeper, seek and you shall find. Ask, and you will receive. In prayer, ask for guidance. Ask that the Holy Spirit be with you, in all that you do, and all that you say. Ask for assurance that God is, indeed, among you, and in you. If you are in doubt, look for a sign. God will give it to you. It's not a sure fire way of getting what you want, but, I'm sure you will get what you need. In your faith community, share your thoughts and feelings. Find out, with others, if you are on the right track, if you are truly being led by the Spirit, or if you are being led by your own ego.

When we come to the manger, when we seek the Christ Child, and learn what it is really all about, we can become transformed. And life will go on, but we will not be the same. We will have the knowledge that God is in us and among us. And we will live in hope. Hope that we will reverently acknowledge God's work by the way we dwell with one another, and others in the world. The hope is we can remember gratefully each day that God has restored dignity to all humanity, for that will surely affect the way we dwell in God's world. The hope is that the phrase, "power to become children of God," will take root in us. The hope is we will permit the face of Jesus, the presence of Jesus, the glory of Jesus to carry out in us the transforming purposes for which he came to earth, for which he abides with us still. Then, we will be full of grace and truth as is He. Seek out the Christ Child, and be transformed.

Amen.