Christmas Eve 10 PM

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All Saints’, Wolcott

When we come together on Christmas Eve, we do so expecting to worship the infant Jesus, Son of God, Messiah. We come expecting to hear the same old story of his miraculous birth that we hear every year. We come expecting to sing the same carols we sing every year. We come, after the craziness of the secular pre-Christmas season (which begins earlier and earlier every year), to find peace and comfort in familiarity and tradition.

All that is well and good, but let us stop and consider that this Holy Child is more than just another cute little baby. He is Emmanuel: God with us – the Creator of all that is and ever will be - who entered this world in a particular time and a particular place, to sanctify all time and space by his Presence in it.

He didn’t just appear on earth fully grown, in majestic royal robes, armed for battle and trailing clouds of glory, as one would expect of the Creator of the worlds. He was born as we are born, of a human mother. The Gospels tell us that she was very young and unmarried and was traveling with her fiancé from Nazareth to his ancestral home in Bethlehem of Judea, to be counted in the census, for purposes of taxation. When birth was immanent, there was no room for them in the local inn, so he was born in a stable and cradled in the animals’ feeding trough.

This story, which is so familiar to us, is a story that brings hope and courage to all new parents, married or not; to all stranded travelers; to all who are homeless; and also to all who fear political treachery; to all exiles and prisoners and refugees. Because shortly after his birth, Matthew tells us, Jesus was scooped up by Mary and Joseph, who fled with him to sanctuary in Egypt in order to avoid King Herod’s mad killing of all the young boys in the kingdom of Judea. God entered the world to stand with all who are poor and homeless; with all who live in fear and oppression; with all who suffer from all forms of xenophobia – “fear of the other.” God entered this world in Jesus Christ, to triumph over the powers of evil and death; to die and rise on this earth, so that we human beings might live in his loving Presence forever beyond the grave.

So when we come to church on Christmas and sing all our favorite carols and gaze on all the beautiful flowers and vestments and other decorations with which we honor this holy birth, let us remember that this Holy Child has come to challenge oppression, to bring justice and mercy and dignity to all people and – by his own suffering, death, and mind-boggling resurrection – to grant the grace of everlasting life to all. He came to show us what love is and how to practice it, and to establish it as the bound-line of all our lives.

This was a very short Advent, and there will be only one Sunday after Christmas this year. We will move along speedily to Lent and Easter. Let us, therefore, cling to the lessons of Christmas which are the good news of the birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us. When we put away the tree and the ornaments, let us not put away these lessons of love and solidarity, but let us extend them to the world around us, in the name of Jesus, our Savior.

No one says it better than Howard Thurman, twentieth-century African-American poet, theologian, philosopher, educator, and civil rights leader, in his poem, “The Mood of Christmas:”

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among people,

To make music in the heart.

Merry Christmas.