



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 29, 2019
The First Sunday After Christmas Day

Festal Eucharist
at 11 o'clock

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate Priest for Pastoral Care*
on
John 1:1-18
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Hark

*O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

Stillness settled over the darkened fields and farms on that silent night all those many years ago. The sheep slumbering in their pastures, the cattle lowing in their stalls. And then suddenly overhead a burst of sound and light. But it was not the herald angels singing on that particular night. No. It was the roar of anti-aircraft cannons. Of German flak exploding around the silent, lightless American warplanes soaring high above the French countryside. Planes discharging their cargo of ordinary men out into the darkness: Iowa farmboys and carpenters from Georgia, California pipefitters and New Jersey mechanics, parachuting down into Nazi-occupied France ahead of the massive invasion steaming across the English Channel towards the beaches of Normandy. 75 years ago this year, on June 6 1944, the Allied Forces launched the D-Day invasion of Europe to attempt to hurl back Hitler's armies and to win the Second World War. But on that night, the airborne soldiers of the 101st and the 82nd would find themselves in the dark and the fog, behind enemy lines, in unfamiliar country, vulnerable and outnumbered and surrounded by the mighty German army who sought to kill them.

"Christmas is not an event within history," writes theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar, "but is rather the invasion of time by eternity." The invasion of time by eternity.

And in the Christmas story, eternity is airdropped behind enemy lines too - the immortal in mortal flesh, life amidst death, good amidst evil, love in an occupied land - the eternal Word of God airdropped into time and place in the human body of the infant Jesus, swaddled in rough cloth and lying in a feeding trough.

God, in the Christian understanding, exists beyond and outside of time and space in a way that sort of bends the brain to consider it. It's where the divine Name, "I AM", spoken to Moses out of the burning bush comes from. I am. God is. No beginning, no end. Beyond beginnings and endings, God is unlike anything else. As Saint Anselm of Canterbury wrote, God is "a being than which no greater can be conceived." Being Itself on an epic, cosmic scale. Before the idea of before. "Time does not exist," George Hunsinger writes, "apart from eternity's embrace. Eternity embraces time on all sides, preceding, accompanying, and fulfilling it." And yet this eternal God, beyond time and space, enters time and space as not only a human being, but

as a human baby in all of its powerlessness and dependence. And here in Jesus, in this Galilean peasant, we see the definitive revelation of God. It's a very strange idea. But it is at the heart of our faith.

Biblical scholars Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch write that the ministry of Jesus was an "extended campaign against demons, death and disease." And it was. Like the D-Day invasion, Jesus came to overthrow the powers of death and disease and the demonic. But over the long haul of time, our incarnate deity is maybe less like the 101st Airborne and more like Johnny Appleseed. That great frontier folk hero of the 18th and 19th Centuries who planted apple trees across the Great Lakes region. Sowing good seed, as the parable says. The invasion of time by eternity in Jesus was good seed planted in the soil of history, to fill this world with heaven, to draw time up into eternity, to co-mingle our lives, our stories with God's life and God's story. To plant within us hope of the ever-lasting, the love of the good, and to enfold in mighty merciful arms our struggles and pains and in so doing to transform them, to raise them and redeem them.

That's the promise of the Christmas story. That the Word of God entered into the midst of all of this life, all of our life, with the possibility of transformation. And still does. Christmas was the establishing of a beachhead of everlasting love and hope and grace "among all the changes and chances of this mortal life" as the Prayer Book says. And that's what we don't want to lose sight of when we talk about Christmas. This mortal life. God entered into this mortal life in Bethlehem. This actual life. This real world. This long and messy human history.

And the hopes and fears of all the years are met in that moment of incarnation - when the eternal enters time.

There is much darkness in our world and in our lives. Demons and death and disease aplenty. Despair and discouragement and depression too. It can seem a long way from Saint John's beautiful prologue to the daily living of our lives.

Right now, families are gathering around the hospital beds of dying loved ones. At the cribsides of tiny infants hooked up to life-saving machines in Neonatal Intensive Care Units. Right now, someone, somewhere is choosing to get up and face another day of chronic pain, of a job they hate, of loneliness or of fear.

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still, the dear Christ enters in.*

The invasion of time by eternity in Christmas was different from D-Day. God sent forth no tanks or bombs or swords or guns. Just this person. This child. And God continues to offer us grace upon grace from the eternal fullness of this child. God, eternity, is available to us here and now. But God does not force us to accept hope or love or grace or anything else. God offers.

As far as we and our hearts are concerned, the incarnation is less an invasion and more an invitation. Those seeds of eternity, of grace, are available to us in the incarnate moments of our days and we can open our hearts to receive them. Or not.

It was a Tuesday, I think, and I was feeling pretty bad about myself. Worn out from work, worried about the big and stressful week ahead, about the balance in my bank account. The black cloud creeping in at the edges of my thoughts - the "dark shouters", as my friend Tim calls those desolate thoughts declaring to me everything I needed to worry about, to be afraid of, to feel like I had messed up or would mess up. I don't know what except the grace of God got me off the couch and onto the streets and into the woods in the park. But I soon found myself on a hill overlooking the windswept winter woods, the last of their fall foliage

blazing in the sunlight. And everything seemed to stop. I could hear nothing but the wind creaking the branches overhead and somewhere off in the distance a blue jay cawing. I felt utterly alive and given a powerful gift in this beautiful moment as the waning sun bathed the trees in golden light. Gratitude welled up within me. For the beauty of the earth and for the one who created it. For beauty itself. For silence and stillness and for life.

This is God among us. This is how eternity invades time. How victory is won of light over darkness. How the great campaign against demons and death and disease is waged. Day by day, in ordinary time and today in ordinary lives, we are given moments, opportunities to love the people before us, to pause and appreciate and worship and love the incarnate Lord here and now. To open up our time to God's eternity.

*O holy Child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born to us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.*

The Word is spoken. The light shineth in the darkness. The seed of eternity is sown in our midst and in our hearts. And it takes root - or it doesn't - in all of our uncertainty, our pain, our struggle and despair and doubt. In all of our hopes and fears.

A poem by Gary Johnson called "December".

"A little girl is singing for the faithful to come ye
Joyful and triumphant, a song she loves,
And also the partridge in a pear tree
And the golden rings and the turtle doves.
In the dark streets, red lights and green and blue
Where the faithful live, some joyful, some troubled,
Enduring the cold and also the flu,
Taking the garbage out and keeping the sidewalk shoveled.
Not much triumph going on here—and yet
There is much we do not understand.
And my hopes and fears are met
In this small singer holding onto my hand.
Onward we go, faithfully, into the dark
And are there angels hovering overhead?
Hark."