

When bells chime and when they don't

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the noon Service, December 24, 2010: The Eve of The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ,
Based on John 1:1-14.*

When a priest says what I am about to say, you can't trust him/her. You deserve to know that up front. For you see the comment poised on my lips is or could be utterly self-serving, not to mention transportable—that is conveniently usable at any service. It doesn't take a genius to know that this is the easiest day in the year to manipulate emotions. So disclaimer given and, I trust, noted: now I can say what is true for me. This service has become one of my favorite Christmas Eve masses. It is billed as a "Quiet Christmas celebration," which in our cacophonous world gets immediately interpreted as if not sad at least very reflective with an edge of reserve and capped joy.

I don't know what has brought each of you to this place at this hour. Maybe you *are* sad; I am always just a half step from sad, which would seem to be the only position a conscious person in this world could take. Or maybe a service like this on Christmas Eve is your trip to sanity, your way of managing what might otherwise feel maniacal and frantic. Or maybe you have somewhere else to be tonight or you just want to stay home, toasty warm and unencumbered.

Whatever has brought you, though, I am glad you are here to join me in saying in all the ways that we can mean it and in some ways we can only hope to mean it: Christ is born; come let us adore him. He has come again and promises to keep coming for as long as our hearts are open and even when they are not, which in the end may be the very best news of all.

I began today with a telephone conversation with a cherished friend in another city, one of those folks with whom there is no pretense, where both joy and sadness are unadorned, as bare as any stable we might imagine the venue for Jesus' entrance into this complicated and wonderful world to have been. She and I are of an age that has covered enough life to know the highs and lows and all the moments in between. In our way, the way of those who have spent too many years in therapy, we pondered the anecdotal truth in our lives, hers and mine, that big things often happen at Christmas. Break-ups occur and people die and spectacular pretense gets shattered and other momentous truth telling takes place sometimes with all the flare of the best fireworks show. Fatigue, overeating, over drinking, and over expecting, of course, help to set the stage for such explosions, but it is more than just that. The longer I live the less surprised I am by the real life poignancy of Christmas. Despite the romanticism that has grown up around it, from the earliest infancy narratives, so rich in yearning and imagination, to the ridiculous promise that all we need for Christmas can be purchased with our American Express card, a transaction which will even give us airlines miles, Christmas

moves us profoundly. In a way that defies understanding Christmas is about truth, the urgency of which surprises us every year. It is about the unadorned truth that we need God, that we need a Savior, that we need Emmanuel, "God with us."

Christmas did not bring God into the world. God is and was and will be in the world, neither our singular creation nor our possession. But Christmas is the story of God's coming in a particular and incarnate way *for us*; it is our story, a story about which to feel not exclusively correct, but a story that embraces our distinct window into the mystery and majesty of God. Little surprise then that embracing such a story makes us crazy. At Christmas, *of course*, we are joyful, sad, connected, alone, hopeful, despondent; we are every emotion that is human precisely because this is the moment that signals God's choice to be incarnate, to live among us, to enter our lives in the fullness of our flesh and blood. The manger, rich in metaphor and truth, pictures better than any other image I know the gift of God's presence in the midst of all that is vulnerable and promising about us, the place of scarcity giving way to all that is new and hopeful about life.

Nothing that we are, nothing we feel is beyond the scope of God for God has come again to be among us.

In the name of God: Merry Christmas, my friends. *Amen.*

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