

# ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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## It's Christmas ... Now What?

*Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, December 25, 2013  
Christmas Day—Based on Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14*

Welcome to you all on this sacred and festive day. It is good for us to be together in this holy place. Merry Christmas!

I'm guessing that we may have come here today from many different places, geographically and culturally. So, wondering if you'll indulge me for a moment:

- How many of you live here in New York City?
- How many are from some other part of the U.S.?
- How many have travelled here from outside the U.S.?

I'm curious about this, too:

- How many have already celebrated Christmas in some way—dinner, gathering with friends or family, unwrapped presents?
- How many are planning to celebrate in some way later today?
- How many just want take a big nap this afternoon?

(It's ok to answer yes to all of those!)

We do come here from different places. We celebrate Christmas in different ways, some traditional and some delightfully non-traditional. Each of us brings our own set of hopes and fears and joys and sorrows with us. Christmas does seem to call forth every emotion, and they are all in here with us today. Which is fine. This is a big space. It can hold all we need to bring.

Whatever pulls us here, from whatever direction or circumstance we come, we are drawn here together seeking something deeper—a yearning that witnesses to the deeper meaning of Christmas.

Here at St. Bart's, preparations for Christmas began well back in the fall. Our anticipation and active waiting intensified through the season of Advent, beginning with our candlelit Advent Lessons and Carols service on December 1, then a joyous Christmas Concert, then the cleaning and greening of the church, the printing of thousands of service leaflets, and a last-minute crisis or two ... or three. Large as this space is, I wasn't sure even it could contain the energy and excitement generated by the weekly Christmas pageant rehearsals.

Yesterday, on Christmas Eve, we began our celebrations at noon with a quiet, joyful service in our beautiful Chapel. Then came the Children's Christmas pageant at 4pm: Luke's great story of Joseph and Mary, great with child, traveling together to Bethlehem where Mary "brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." That story takes on new meaning when you hear it told—well told—by children's voices. Luke's great story came to life before our very eyes, right here in the chancel, complete with the most adorable, 3-month old baby Jesus, one stray sheep, shepherds who took their jobs very seriously, a host of very active angels, and the surprise star of the show—a two-humped dancing camel.

Our two evening services last night were glorious celebrations with inspired preaching, heartfelt prayers, and the most sublime music you can imagine. At the late service, clouds of incense swirled in the air, along with the prayers and music and emotions. There was mystery, even a little magic. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Now here we are at Christmas Day. Today feels different. The incense has cleared ... mostly. Emotions are still with us, perhaps freshly stirred by Christmas Eve, or the holiday season, or just by life. Some of us may be tired from travel, or from the effort to get along with family, or from work, even work we love.

In these past few weeks, I've talked with several folks who've lost their jobs, and others whose livelihoods feel precarious. I've talked with one or two who've gotten great new jobs. I've talked with someone who's just received a serious medical diagnosis, and others who are bravely working their way back to full health. I've talked with several who are grieving the loss of a loved one, with some facing their first—or another—Christmas alone. And with one couple just married here yesterday, another just engaged yesterday, and another couple expecting their first child almost any moment.

Yesterday two of us found a quiet corner and wept at the tragedy of the father who threw his son off a building, then jumped to his own death. What could we do but weep and pray together?

There is enough poverty, injustice and danger in our own country, let alone the wider world, to disturb any of us, the latest being the escalating crisis in South Sudan.

Into this very human mix on Christmas morning comes the great poetry of the Gospel of John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ... In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God takes on flesh and “camps out” among us. As the real live flesh-and-blood Jesus, God reveals God's self to us. Why? John offers an answer a few chapters later: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son ...” Some call this the greatest love story ever written. God becomes Incarnate—takes on flesh and dwells among us—the better to love us incarnational beings. The better to teach us how to love each other.

God gets intimately involved in the messiness of the world by becoming fully human. God doesn't come to save isolated individuals, much as we may desperately want that from time to time. God comes to save each of us within the web of community, within the web of belonging. God's love is not for the few, but for all of us. [*The Christian Century*, 12/25/13, p. 7]

God's love is larger than any particular religion.

Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus, of God's love coming into the world in a completely new way: God's love incarnate. God comes to us in love—love greater than we can ever ask or imagine. God comes to us as one of us to show us how to love each other.

Hear these words on putting Christmas into practice from Howard Thurman, African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader. [From *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations* by Howard Thurman. Friends United Press, 2001 edition.]

*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.*

May this day quicken us to notice how God is being born in our hearts again and again and again. And whenever we find God's love being born in us, or in another, let us incarnate that love by sharing it, by finding a way to live God's love and grace and truth into God's world.

It's Christmas Day, my friends. Let our work of Christmas begin.  
Come, o come, Emanuel.

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