

Christmas Eve 2018

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

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Welcome in the name of our loving Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's quite natural at this time of year that we are thinking back and reminiscing on everything that the year brought with it. Summer vacations, visiting relatives, family gatherings, new jobs, old jobs, struggles and joys – our lives are full.

A favorite memory I will take away this year is taking my first “real” motorcycle trip. It was 5 days, on my own bike under the watchful eye of my much more experienced husband. Here at Holy Spirit we initiated a plan to renovate our washrooms and we enthusiastically welcomed 2 large and one small newcomer family to Canada. In the world we've seen all sorts of stories from daily political surprizes to the legalization of pot here in Canada.

But, tonight we set all that aside and gladly reflect on the beautiful and mysterious story of Jesus' coming into the world. We know through this story that something wondrous took place – God entering our lives in a unique way, traversing the boundary between divine and human. It's a story that crosses over the thresholds of all that is good and not so good, entering our homes and families again and again with hope and love. Just hearing it again, we breathe a sigh of peace, giving thanks for the familiar stable, Mary, Joseph and of course the swaddled babe.

This story might not change, but it is always calling us to transformation. It's not a story that sanctions life the way it is, but invites us to see the possibility of a more humane, just and peaceful world. Mary said yes to God's invitation to bear a child. Joseph heard the angel's encouragement and opened his heart. Then together they crossed the country to start a new family. All along the way boundaries of social norm and expectation were crossed and in

every step fear is disabled by promise, shame eradicated by encouragement, despair turns to deep joy. We learn that God is never contained, but she cuts across the boundaries and labels we construct in order to be with us.

That's what love is. Love softens hardened hearts. Love heals broken relationships. Love brings peace to places of violence. Love forgives. Love is not afraid to enter into places that are different or dangerous or devoid of goodness.

At Christmas we describe Jesus as "God incarnate." It means, *in the flesh*, a person, just like you or I – no longer a burning bush, no longer a deep voice from the clouds, no longer a god that we cannot see, but actual flesh and blood human.

Some years ago I served on the council of our National Church. We used to meet in an old convent in Winnipeg called Villa Maria (a good Catholic name!) There weren't many nuns left, but the fruit of their labor was everywhere from the beautiful grounds, delicious meals and well-kept building. After a few years of meeting there however, the building was sold, taken over by a school and renamed Laureate's Landing. In the small sanctuary the religious items were removed, including the cross that hung on the wall behind the altar.

We continued to meet there twice a year. And when it was time for worship one could still see where the cross had hung; the wood paneling, after years of the cross hanging there, had it left its mark by transforming the wood underneath it. That spot was lighter than all the rest of the wood around it; there was no way to hide what once used to be there. It made me think that somewhere out there, in the big world of Winnipeg, women of faith were still sprinkled about like yeast leaving their mark by their presence in a new way.

And it also made me think that perhaps these women were some of the lucky ones in faith, because they allowed God to lead them to a new way of being. They recognized that God wasn't only in the

convent, any more than Jesus was still in the manger. So too, we ought to remember that being the church isn't about a building or a style of worship or even about the candles we will light.

Being God's people is to be the embodiment of God with one another. We live the Christmas story as we learn to enact justice, mercy, forgiveness, and love. We become wrapped in the flesh of Christ when we tear down walls, welcome the less fortunate, and work to change our own hearts.

It's difficult work, but as we well know, anything important usually is.

- We're working to welcome refugees – and we're a little uncertain of how our lives will be impacted.
- We're searching for alternative energies even as we depend on oil and gas – and we are a bit fearful of the future.
- We're raising our voices against violence and inequality - even though we're not sure how to make real change.
- We continue to hope for peace in our homes and communities – and we know we must take our place to make it happen.

In these types of things, God is incarnate through us. Every decision we make to recycle, forgive, welcome, heal, pray, worship, comfort and so much more are ways that we join with God in a labor of love.

May we labor with God and with Mary to usher in a new world, a new creation, a renewed hope for the world, our loved ones, and yes, even for ourselves.

Amen.