

St. James' Episcopal Church Cindy Baskin
Christmas Eve – Year A, December 24, 2010 – 7:30 pm & 10:30 pm
Texts: Is 9:2-7; Ps 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Theme: Emmanuel, God with us.
Scripture: *To you is born this day . . . a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

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How many of you have experienced a flood of feelings over the past couple of weeks as you've anticipated this particular evening? Feelings that may have run from the very positive – hope, anticipation, even joy – to the other side of the spectrum: dread, sadness, perhaps even despair.

I suspect most of us approach Christmas with a plethora of expectations and all the accompanying feelings generated therein. Some of us have expectations built around family and family traditions. They include assumptions about what we will eat, how we will decorate our homes, with whom we will celebrate (which may involve some sort of travel), and, of course, the shopping and gift giving that comes with the season. We hope for a time of peace and the warmth and joy that comes from close, loving relationships between family and friends. But along with that hope, there is all too often an accompanying sense of frustration, worry, and fatigue, coupled with preparation that borders on the frantic.

This past Sunday morning, one of our adult classes here at St. James' held a session entitled: "Managing Expectations." The session description stated: "*Children's holiday expectations range from wonder to worry. How can we prepare and cope? From giving and receiving to getting along with relatives, comparing with friends, and the changes in routine that the season brings.*" I understand that this group plans to follow up after Christmas with a discussion that asks: "How did we do, managing our expectations?" That should prove to be an interesting discussion!

Our very hoped-filled expectations can become a springboard to something quite different when those expectations aren't met. Although we hope that most of us gathered here this night will feel great peace and joy during this Christmas tide, we also know there are others who are struggling to cope with great sadness or loss: the death of a loved one; worrying about mounting financial debts; or struggling with broken relationships.

A few years ago, a man came walking into our church on this very same night, following the 7:30 pm Christmas Eve service (Christmas, 2002). Our church, of course, looked beautiful with all the warmth of candle light and the powerful Christmas music still sounding in the air. But this elderly gentleman had a black eye and was not clad in particularly warm clothing – certainly not clothing for the kind of weather that was the reality that night – a night like tonight and very cold. He told some of our folks who were beginning to clean up from the service that he needed a ride home. We wondered if he were lost, perhaps suffering from Alzheimer's. But as I talked with him, his story unfolded.

He lived in Bethesda, but he and his wife had been driving down Seven Locks Road. They had a fight in the car. She was driving and stopped the car, telling him to get out, which he had done. So here he was, stranded on a cold, winter night, and seeking help at St. James'.

It's a sad story – a marital fight and an elderly gentleman stranded by the side of the road on Christmas Eve. But perhaps this is not such an unusual a story. For the first Christmas was pretty scary for those living it as well: a very pregnant woman forced to take a difficult journey because of a political decree; a worried husband who has difficulty finding shelter for his wife even as she goes into labor. Sometimes we forget the scary nature of that first Christmas—that it was all about things that were unexpected and occurring in unsought places. And those shepherds . . . just out doing their daily and regular work . . . certainly didn't expect an announcement from

an angel.

But that's the incredibly powerful and important message of Christmas: that even when things do not go as planned or expected, God arrives. Regardless of our feelings, regardless of our expectations (either fulfilled or left unfulfilled), the good news of this night is that Jesus has been born; Emmanuel has come; and that means God is with us.

We have just heard the story once again of shepherds out in a field, visited by a heavenly messenger who announces that the one foretold has been born. But have you ever noticed just how directly **personal** this address is? The angel says, "*I am bringing **you** good news . . . ; to **you** is born this day . . . ; this will be a sign for **you***" (vs 10, 11, 12). Martin Luther once noted, "*He [the angel] does not simply say: 'Christ is born,' but 'for you he is born.'*"¹ . . . *What good would it do me, if he were born a thousand times and if this were sung to me every day with the loveliest airs, if I should not hear that there was something in it for me and that it should be by own?*"² For you, for me, Christ is born.

Jürgen Moltmann, a 20th cy German theologian, has said that it is one thing to talk about "the God above us," – that far, transcendent power that is able to change the world. It is also popular to speak of the "God within us" – that inner, conscience-making force that is personal and intimate. We speak as well of the "God between us" – that force that enables relationships between human beings. But what gives real, sustained hope, says Moltmann, is "God with us."³

Please look at the bulletin cover for our service tonight: it reads: "**They shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us.**" The Christmas story reminds us that God sought to come to earth, to dwell among us as Emmanuel, God with us, in situations of struggle and ambiguity. As one author puts it: "This "is a sign to us that God enters into the very ambiguous and difficult, very real and gritty, situations in our lives, to love and redeem us."⁴ "Immanuel, God with us . . . in our nature, in our sorrow, in our life work, in our punishment, in our grave, and now with us, or rather we with Him in resurrection, ascension, triumph, and 2nd Advent splendor" (Charles Spurgeon).

"God with us" is God's work unfolding in the midst of our daily lives – not despite life's other tasks, or dashed expectations, but in the midst of them.

Yes, we have heard the familiar Christmas story once again. A story of angels in the sky, of shepherds out in a field, of a travel-weary couple taking refuge in a barn, and of a baby born and laid in an animal's feeding trough. The angel said: ***To you** is born this day . . . a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.* Two thousand years ago this message was not heard by everyone and the appearance of Jesus went unnoticed by many. But the shepherds did take notice and came to the manger.

The question for us tonight is will we notice? Will we come to the manger? If we do, we too will find Emmanuel – God with us – the God who is with us, no matter where we live, no matter how difficult the moment or obscure the place may appear, no matter our expectations or current feelings. This is the child who is indeed the Savior – the one who will touch the deepest parts of our being, the one who can truly transform us. This is the one we are once again invited to come and see – a babe lying in a manger; "Emmanuel, God with us."

¹Quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 2010) 116; from Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 52, *Sermons, II*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1974), 15.

²*Ibid.*, 116.

³Quoted in *Pulpit resource* by William Willimon, Vol 32, No. 4 (October-December, 2004) 56. From "Hope and History," *Theology Today*, October, 1968, p. 376.

⁴*LectionAid*, Vol 19, No. 1, Year A, December 2010-February 2011 (Boulder CO: LectionAid, Inc., 2010)