

First Sunday after Christmas / 30 December 2007

RCL: Isaiah 63:7–9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10–18; Matthew 2:13–23

Sometimes the terms “religion” and “culture” are synonyms. Sometimes they are antonyms. Sometimes they are both. The current expression of “Christmas”, not to be confused with the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, in our culture makes the case. I have a vague recollection of a lawsuit a few years back in which the designation of Christmas as a national legal holiday (with Post Office, Federal Reserve, and courts all closed) was challenged on the grounds that it violated the first amendment right against the establishment of religion. The Court shot that down saying that there is nothing religious about Christmas: it’s a social and economic event. A read through the business section of the *Press-Democrat* for the last couple weeks certainly supports the economic claim. The social side of the argument can be made through travel statistics, and the fact that Christmas has the highest number of suicides, homicides, and incidents of domestic violence of the entire year. The level of stress that foments the tension has nothing to do with God’s promise of grace and salvation and everything to do with our propensity to forget that God is with us.

Now, in fact, we don’t know when Jesus was born. The year is vague and the date has never been stated. The celebration of Jesus’ birth on 25 December is a practice that was first documented in the year 336 in Rome. The December date was probably chosen to offer Christian competition to the celebration of the solstice and a feast called *Natalis Solis Invicti*, or Birth of the Unconquered Sun. Rather like a “chemical-free graduation party” alternative to the excesses of the *Saturnalia*, which ran from 17–24 December. Merry-making and feasting has always been part of the solstice event, so giving Christians a viable alternative focus was a brilliant bit of evangelism and enculturation.

What passes for Christmas in contemporary American culture is heir to the influences of Victorian England (Albert, Prince Consort popularized the Christmas Tree tradition from his native Germany, though even that was a Christianized pagan practice), Charles Dickens, and Clement Clarke Moore's 1822 poem "'Twas the night before Christmas". None of these influences and traditions have any connection whatsoever with the Nativity of Our Lord. Criticism of the ever-increasing commercial excess of materialism of the last two generations is a common screed. Me, I give full points to the Deceiver, that is to say the Devil, for the level of distraction and misery that are the parents of the over-spending, over-eating, over-drinking, and over-reacting that are common guests in so many households at this time of year.

In the Church, this First Sunday after Christmas is often referred to as Low Sunday. Everyone is exhausted and many (most?) people skip church altogether. Present company excepted, of course ☺. It's very traditional amongst the clergy to have a sub for this Sunday to give the Rector the chance to recharge.

So how do we, who recognize that we are in the middle of the 12-day Season of Christmas, awaiting the Feast of the Epiphany and celebration of the Baptism of Our Lord, how do *we* process, cope with, and counter the chaos of imagery and noise that surrounds us?

Everyone in this room has already taken a major step in the right direction simply by being here today to celebrate the Eucharist in which we remember the death, resurrection, and ascension of Our Lord, until he comes again. Our scripture readings also give us the opportunity to focus on who this God-with-us is for us and how we can understand our relationship with and through Jesus Christ.

I love this Psalm 148 because it is a hymn of Creation, or rather it is Creation's hymn of praise to the Creator. We're more familiar with the Native American sensibility of the interconnectedness holiness of all nature, but in fact, and right here,

we see before us our own theology of creation: that all created things, seen and unseen, themselves rejoice and praise God. The sun, the moon, the stars praise God for their creation and being. So does the weather, and sea-monsters, creepy-crawlies, cattle and beasties and birds, and all people, high and low, young and old—there is equality here before God. Every single thing has a voice that is equal in praise of God. This is the world that God so loves that he gives us his only Son, not to condemn us, but through whom we might be saved. This is the meaning of Christmas.

The Writer to the Hebrews reminds us of the enormity and necessity of the birth of Immanuel, God-with-us, by reminding us that God has waded into the realities of our human existence in all its pain and sordidness, experiencing the suffering that is more common to life than not. The birth of Jesus was a human birth, and as such it was an event of pain and blood with the potential for death with the very first breath the baby takes, just like every child ever born. We are an extraordinarily fortunate generation in time and place because suffering and death seem not to be our constant companions. We're mistaken in that, but in the meantime, we live in comfort, relative safety and health, and God is with us. But so also is God with those who live sorrow, need, and many kinds of trouble.

The gospel reading reminds us of the violence of tyrants and governments. The horror of the wholesale slaughter of boy-babies in the hopes of assassinating one particular target is echoed in our world time and time again, including this past week, as murder is used as a political tool. This is the world into which our Lord was willing to born, in order to be with us and show us the better Way. This is the meaning of Christmas.

The Prophet Isaiah tells us that for the People of God (one of the meanings of the word “israel”), God becomes their/our savior in all our distress, because it is

God's nature to be merciful and steadfast with abundant love. This is the meaning of Christmas.

It is hard to hear what God is saying to us with the distraction of our culture on the one hand and the ever-present violence and chaos of our world on the other hand. The meaning of Christmas is that God has been born into this very world in order to be with us, with mercy and love, right in the midst of all of it. Is the world more materialistic and violent than in previous generations? I don't know. The things, the stuff, that overwhelm us and the weapons that we use, yes these are different from previous generations. But not the fact that we crave, abuse, and wreak havoc. We certainly *need* God-with-us as much, if not more, than any previous generation.

The meaning of Christmas is that still, even now, God *is* with us.