

A sermon for the Feast of the Nativity, preached by the rector, in the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, 2011.

You found your way this morning. You've arrived once again, and you've entered the beauty of holiness. Christmas morning is such a profound gift. A friend in Maine called to lament the fact that her church cancelled their Christmas morning liturgy--there aren't enough people, evidently.

I love Christmas morning. I say it every year, probably because it's so true for me. There's no question that I love also the grandness of Christmas Eve--a crowded church, the buzz of children so excited that they literally cannot sit still, and the brightness of music dispelling darkness. So Christmas Eve has its place, and it's a noble and glorious place. But I prefer Christmas morning. I love the quiet. I need the reminder that in returning and rest I shall be saved, and that in quietness and in confidence I shall have strength. I suspect we share these sentiments because many of you are always here on Christmas morning. And if this is your first Christmas morning, I'm reasonably certain that it won't be your last.

Today's gospel is the beginning of the gospel according to St. John. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This is how he begins his version of the good news...he begins at the beginning. There aren't any shepherds, there are no angels, there is no swathing bands, or oxen and cattle lowing. Instead, John takes us back to the beginning, all the way back to the beginning of everything, to the book of Genesis. In the beginning God created; God moved over the chaos and darkness and said, "let there be light."

God, who takes upon our flesh, doesn't ignore the darkness, but instead, shines a light in the very midst of it.

That's so essential for us to hear this morning. That God comes to us, all the time and in every place, to make a new beginning, to try on what it's like to be human. It's essential to hear that because for many throughout the world this is not the most wonderful time of the year, despite the lyrics of the popular song. In these days--one of the hardest economic times of our lifetime--we're unsure about what the future holds. The war in Iraq is officially over, but the one in Afghanistan doesn't seem to have an end in sight, and all of us watch carefully to see how things on the Korean peninsula might unfold. Thirteen people in our own parish--and those are the ones whom I know, I'm sure there are others--are grieving the death of loved ones who were here last Christmas, but not today. Then there are the scores of people for whom faith is not so clear or felt, for whom expressing conviction and mystery in God's presence is impossible. Yet they too long to catch the good news. Into this and into every reality God comes with light, and the light is more powerful than any darkness known or imagined.

This is my third Christmas here. On that first one, in 2009, Louise Munding sang a carol during communion, from the hymnal, and I was embarrassed to admit to her that I had never before heard it. She was incredulous at my ignorance, but kind nonetheless. She will sing it again this morning, but maybe your knowledge is the way mine was...if so, consider this. Evidently it was the first Christmas carol written on the North American continent, by a French Jesuit priest who lived among the Huron People in what is now Ontario in the early 1600s. Father Brebeuf wrote it in the Huron language--wishing to make the story of Christ's birth, the incarnation of God, accessible to those First Nation people. So there are references to broken bark, rabbit skin, and forest hunters. The version we use was translated in 1926--not all that long ago really--and now cathedrals and churches in every major Canadian city and every small town and village--as far east as Corner Brook and as far west as Victoria--mark Christmas with the singing of this carol. We do so here too.

You found your way here this morning. For most of us it wasn't all that far, some of us so close that we walked, but never mind the physical distance or nearness for a moment. Consider the joyous wonder that you have found your way. In these 12 days you might think about lingering around the manger--if not literally at least in your prayers--to consider the powerful reconciliation which this birth has wrought, to rejoice in the bridged gap between what has been and what is yet to be.

Several of you know that I discovered Ted Ferris, the late rector of Trinity Church in the City of Boston. Thanks to eBay and Amazon I now have on my shelves everything of his writing and preaching that's published.

I close with a Christmas gift, recycled from Dr. Ferris. Let us pray.

We thank you, O God, for the light that shine in the darkness, for the Christ who came into our world, and who uses us to be instruments of his glory and love. As we rejoice on this day, without forgetting the sadness and the sorrow that is all abroad in the world, we remember that light which the darkness cannot put out and which, if we will let it, shall shine in us. Amen.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.