

## CHRISTMAS EVE

Isaiah 43:18-21

John 1:1-16

At Christmas ...when I think about God ...

I remember that God has a name...

and I recall God has a human face.  
And that is quite remarkable.

Perhaps you have thought of God as THE HIGHEST. THE ABSOLUTE. THE ULTIMATE. PERHAPS AS SOMETHING OF A MYSTERIOUS ABSTRACTION.

**But at Christmas God takes on a name. And a human face.  
AND HE WAS NAMED JESUS. SAVIOR.  
To me, that's awesome.**

By being here this evening, you and I are saying that we want to come close to this story, hear it again, ponder it in silence and carol and candlelight, and to be a part of it.

But even more ... we want to be met by ...  
we hope to be embraced with this Jesus.

I wonder, why would God choose to do such a thing. To come into human history in the birth of a child? The answer, I believe, is love.

When God wanted to tell us how dearly and unconditionally we are loved, God did it in the simplest, clearest, most eloquent way possible, a way no one could miss or misunderstand— ...  
... through the birth of a baby.

When God wanted to touch our hearts and invite gratitude and love from us, God chose the birth of a baby.

His mother, Mary, and Joseph, his father, set out from Nazareth on the long trek south, to Jerusalem and then beyond, to Bethlehem, town of Joseph's birth.

No, they were not travelling to be home for Christmas, for Christmas had not yet been invented.

Rather, they were traveling back to Joseph's ancestral home for a census ordered by the

Emperor. And a census signaled higher taxes. So no, this was not a pleasure trip, or family reunion. It only reminded Mary and Joseph and others who were on the road that those hard times were only going to become more difficult.

Depending on the route they took, they travelled 70-100 miles in all. Mary was quite pregnant. Travel was not easy. When finally they reached Bethlehem, every available place was taken: there was no room in the inn. So they settled for the night in a stable out back. They were out of the weather at least and warm from the animals.

During that long night, Mary's labor began, and the child, a son, Jesus, was born. They wrapped him closely in strips of cloth, cradled him in their arms and she nursed him, then they placed him in the manger. That was the feed trough for the nearby sheep and cow.

**And that, we believe, is the way God comes among us:** in the birth of a child. In the way every one of us was born, in the incredible miracle of human life, in the love of a mother and father, a family. Soon, within the welcome of a community.

**That is how God comes,** we believe. God comes in life lived, as that baby, as he became a man, lived his life—with faithfulness and courage and self-giving love.

**That is how God comes:** when the poor are cared for, as the oppressed receive justice, the forgotten and excluded are greeted, and the lost are received home. Grand hospitality ... that's God's way.

**That is how God comes:** in love that knows it is far better to give than to receive, to forgive rather than to bear grudges; in a love more powerful than death; in love, one of his followers wrote not long after Jesus died, love from which nothing can ever separate us.

It is a stunningly simple story about human life at its most human.

The glory of this story—and the reason countless millions of people around the world are pausing to hear it again even though we have heard it hundreds of times and know every detail by heart—the glory

of it and the reason you and I have come here this evening is that it is a story about God ... and about you and me.

God coming into the world;

    God revealed in a human life;

        God living among us;

            God revealed as he was born and lived and worked and laughed and loved;

                God revealed as he taught and healed and challenged religious convention;

                    God revealed as he reached out to touch the lives of all—his best friends, their families, lawyers and priests, poor and oppressed, outcast and those who live on the margins;

                        God revealed in Jesus' honest, resilient, unconditional love;

                            God revealed as Jesus suffered and died.

The Christmas story is about our God who rules not from a magnificent throne in a far-off corner of heaven, but from a stable in Bethlehem, a cross on Calvary, a table where bread was broken and wine shared and where all are welcome.

God comes that close to us.

**And one thing further:** a generation after Jesus lived, one of his followers, thinking about Jesus and what he did and what it all meant, an old man, with most of his life behind him, wrote these words: "In Jesus was life and the life was the light of all people. . . . The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

There is plenty of darkness:

**darkness when we're afraid**, worried about our nation and the world and the future, worried about our young people fighting wars, worried, for resolution and peace seem so remote,

**darkness when you are about to lose your job** and nothing is going right, and you find yourself paying for long-forgotten mistakes – or was it folly? Darkness when long-enjoyed assets become deficits fraught with regret and disappointment,

**darkness when your children** ... or is it your grandchildren are in trouble and so much of life seems to be swirling out of control ...and you fear the children will not have the opportunities you enjoyed,

**Yes ... there is plenty of darkness ... the darkness of sickness and aging ... and death.**

**BUT LOOK ... SEE ... “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light.”**

The love of God is born among us and nothing can or will ever separate us from that love.

Friends, gathered this evening, as you light a small candle and watch as it sputters and then flames and miraculously joins the light of the people sitting around you and slowly, surely, fills this space with light, remember, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light.”

Make a place in your heart for that light this evening. Keep it burning tomorrow and the next day and all the days ahead.

Amen.