

Christ is born for us

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017.

Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people. Luke 2:10

The decorations are up, the Christmas cards have been mailed, the presents are wrapped, and all is in place. Whatever didn't get done won't matter now. All that remains is to focus on the celebration of the birth of Christ.

The crèche or nativity scenes are displayed in a variety of ways, both traditional and contemporary. The figures of Joseph and Mary hover over the infant Jesus while the shepherds look on in awe. The Magi, also known as the three kings or Wise Men are approaching. So much tradition has accumulated around the story of the visitors to the Nativity. The historical details in the biblical account are less important than the central point that Jesus was born at a certain place and time in human history to bring redemption to all humanity. The life he lived and gave for us is the greatest example of sacrificial love. His birth marks the axis point of all human history.

Years ago, when I made the long journey on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I knelt in awe at the traditional site of the birthplace of Jesus. No one is sure of the actual site of Christ's birth. It was chosen in the 4th century by Saint Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine. His conversion to Christianity marked the end of the age of Christian persecution. While it is a powerful experience to visit the sacred sites in the Holy Land, each of us makes our own journey to know Christ personally. With the birth of Christ the world has never again been the same.

The Magi are among the central characters in the story of Amahl and the Night Visitors by Gian Carlo Menotti. It is about a young boy and his mother who are impoverished. Amahl has a disability that requires him to use a crutch to get around. One night he tells his mother that he has seen a very bright star high above their house. Before falling asleep his mother prays that her son will not have to survive by begging. When they are awakened by a knock at the door, Amahl opens it to find strangers dressed in elaborate finery. They appear to be Wise Men or Magi who have traveled a long way and ask to stay the night in their home. When Amahl asks where they are going, they explain that they are delivering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to a newborn child. The men are weary from their traveling and are shown to their rooms. While they are asleep, one of the king's pages awakens to find the Amahl's mother pilfering the treasure chest for a few gold coins for herself and her son. Amahl awakes to find the page and his mother struggling over the gold coins. When the Wise Men are alerted to the commotion, one of them intervenes to allow her to keep the gold, telling her that the child will not need all of it. Amahl joins the Magi on their journey to visit the newborn Christ child to give him his crutch, the only thing he has, to be used as a walking stick. Amahl is then healed of his disability.

There is a sharp contrast between the shepherds and the Wise Men at the Nativity. The shepherds as the first to arrive are on the lower rung of the social scale. They stay with their flock day and night guarding them from danger. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain in their hope for a better life. By contrast, the Wise Men or Magi leave their comfortable surroundings in search for the newborn king of a different realm. The Bible doesn't say there are three of them, only that there are three gifts. They may be priests of the religion of Zoroaster who are guided in their journey by the movements of the stars. Tradition has named them: Gaspard brings gold for the child who will be king; Melchior brings frankincense for his priestly role; and Balthazar brings myrrh for anointing at his death.

The shepherds who own little or nothing represent those who are powerless and voiceless while the Wise Men who leave the comfort of all they have in search for what they don't have represent those who have the power to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of all humanity.

The story doesn't end with the endearing scene of the Nativity. It continues with Jesus growing into full humanity to be a man with a mission. The manger or feeding trough used as his crib reminds us that we are fed spiritually in sharing this great sacrament of the Eucharist. It is in sharing these elements of bread and wine that we are made one with Christ who lives in us and we in him.

The same hope for those in the first century A.D. is also our hope in this twenty-first century. I pray that we will be remembered for our renewed commitment to reflect Christ's love in marriage and family, in school and at work, and in the voting booth. Let this be the year that our Christian faith is more than frothy religiosity, more than wistful uncommitted spirituality that demands little and means nothing.

As we celebrate that God has come to us in the person of Christ Jesus remember that he is not only inspired by God's spirit; he is God in human form. Since God became one of us that we might become more like God, the world has never again been the same.

The Word of God expresses the mind of God incarnated in the person of Jesus. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus as the Word took on human form to dwell among us. In the beginning, the mind of God initiated the process of creation. The mind of God acted again to make humanity a living soul. By overcoming the forces of evil and death, Christ bridges the chasm caused by human sin.

As you open your gifts this Christmas, remember that Christ Jesus is the greatest gift ever given or received. Celebrate his birth by letting Christ be born in you. May you be the best gift you have to offer to those whom you love and who love you.