

**The wonders of God's love**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016.

*This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. Luke 2:12*

With all the rush of gift buying of this season, we are here this night to proclaim that in the birth of the Christ God broke through human history to come among us. The depth of God's redeeming love for us is seen in the one remarkable life of Christ Jesus. This celebration of his birth occurs on what once was the non-Christian festival of the winter solstice. Puritans in New England passed a law in 1659 that forbade the observance of Christmas. The writer H. L. Menken once said that, "Puritans had the haunting fear that someone, somewhere was happy." It is hard to believe that Christmas was once an ordinary workday and that failure to report for work was grounds for dismissal. As late as 1870, children in Boston public schools were expected to be in class on Christmas. It took the influence of immigrants from Ireland and Germany to convince the Puritans that Christmas should be a religious holiday. Tonight we focus on the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem whose life changed the course of human history.

At that time, Bethlehem was overcrowded with travelers arriving from many directions. Joseph and his young wife searched for a place to stay. Having found refuge in a stable isn't as bad as it sounds. The limestone caves that dotted the hill-sides of Judea provided a natural shelter for people as well as animals. It wasn't like having to stay in a shabby garage behind a hotel. It was in these humble circumstances that God intervened in human history in the birth of the Christ child who lived a life of humility and sacrifice.

The crèche or manger used as a crib was a feeding trough for animals. Coming from the French infinitive, manger, "to eat," the significance of the manger is that God was incarnated into humanity as the bread of life to feed and nourish our souls. Bread has significance in our salvation history. In the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, young Joseph had the foresight to store up enough grain in barns to feed people in time of famine. During their long journey in the desert wilderness in search of the Promised Land, the Israelites were provided with a bread-like substance known as manna for their nourishment. Jesus as the bread of life was born in the city of Bethlehem, a name that means "house of bread." The prayer which Jesus taught us says, "Give us this day our daily bread" because our souls need to be spiritually fed and nourished. The mission of the disciples to evangelize the world has been compared to one beggar telling another where to find bread. When Jesus preached before the large crowd in his sermons on the mount, he provided enough food with only five loaves and two small fish. On the night before he died, Jesus broke bread with his friends and told them to remember him in the sharing of bread. Today, there are food pantries that collect food and churches that serve meals to the poor and homeless.

When we gather here each week, we are nourished in this great sacrament at the altar. It is in the Eucharist that we find the strength and motivation to represent Christ wherever we are. Whenever we act in his name, we are providing the bread of life to others. Those who are lonely and have no one to care for them are nourished by those who visit them. Those who need affirmation are given encouragement and support. Those who need to unburden their guilt receive the assurance of God's forgiveness. Those who seek solace are given understanding and comfort. Those who suffer injustice are vindicated.

Jesus, who had no place to call home, offers hospitality to all. Because he is the host at every celebration of the Eucharist, the bread is referred to as the host. In the same way, we set the example of showing hospitality to friend and stranger alike, especially to those who might be easily overlooked. There are no outcasts. We welcome the poor, the lonely, the stranger, the hungry and the sick by giving back their dignity. When we welcome those on the margins we welcome Christ. When we receive them as guests and accept them for who they are, we are receiving Christ. His birth is the pivotal point of all the events that line the shelves of history. Because of this one man's life, we find in ourselves the capacity to be more understanding, more compassionate and more forgiving. From the simple wooden manger to the crude wooden cross, Christ gave himself completely that we might know God's redeeming love.

In Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, the character of Ebenezer Scrooge thinks Christmas is humbug and is only

interested in his wealth. When he asks his cheery nephew Fred, “What’s Christmas ever done for you?” Fred replies, “There are many things that have made me happy; things that haven’t fattened my purse by this much and Christmas is one of them. I’ve always looked upon Christmas as a good time, a kind, giving, and charitable time. It’s the only time when men and women seem to realize they’re all from the same family and we owe each other some measure of warmth and solace. Though it has never put a scrap of gold in my pocket, I believe it has done me good and I say, ‘God bless it.’ ”

Feel the stillness of that night so long ago in Bethlehem when the birth of the Christ child changed the face of human history forever. Set aside every weight and care that interferes with being in touch with the source of your redemption. Christ acts within us to overcome every anxiety, every broken dream and every failed relationship. Seek out someone you haven’t seen or heard from in a long time. Nurture relationships that endure. Replace suspicion with trust. Avoid making promises you can’t keep and keep the ones you can. Forgive and let go of a grudge. Learn to laugh at yourself and be grateful for little things. And, if you love someone, say so.

Jesus is truly God with us. He is not some metaphor in ancient literature, but is pinpointed in time and place in human history. The great mystery of the infinite God taking on finite humanity means that God really does care. And, for that, we sing this night the wonders of God’s love.