

## Christmas 2022

Good morning dear friends on this Christmas Day.

I hope yours is a blessed one.

And may we begin with a special good morning to those of you who are grieving the loss of loved ones this year?

The absence of those we love is particularly hard on Christmas.

But please know this: that grief, as painful as it is, becomes with time, the soil from which much wisdom and insight and compassion can grow.

Maybe talking about grief is a strange way to begin a Christmas sermon.

After all, we are surrounded by voices from every side telling us to be happy.

To spend more than we have.

To eat up and drink more.

And not only that, but we're living in times when it seems our American culture has taken its last bite out of what Christmas is all about.

Just last week the newspaper reported that some 20% of Christian churches have decided not to have Christmas services this morning.

And why is that?

Because Christmas falls on a Sunday this year.

And apparently, many church going folks “don’t attend Christmas services when Christmas falls on a weekday.

Because Christmas is NOT a time to be in church, it’s a time to be in your PJ’s, with family and hot chocolate!” Ruth Graham, NYT, 12/18/22.

So with Christmas falling on a Sunday this year, many pastors have cancelled Sunday service, because no one’s showing up!

It’s ironic how so many churches have apparently decided to take the “Christ out of Christmas” by making the day all about Santa Claus and consuming – rather than celebrating the birth of a new world order that begins with God’s own self coming to live with us.

So, why are you here?

Why am I?

Why aren’t **we** home in our PJ’s sipping hot chocolate?

For those of us who claim Jesus as our Lord, it’s a question worth wrestling with.

Maybe you’re here because this is where your faith brings you each and every Christmas.

Maybe you’re here because of family tradition or superstition or habit.

Maybe you’re here out of curiosity.

Or are you looking for something that's eluded you for a long time?

Whatever your reasons, thank you for being here!

And since we are here, may I offer a few words about why, from this priest's point of view, we are all of us here?

We live in a society that shouts about nearly everything.

From the latest tech gadget, to the news of maybe indicting a former president, to the "after Christmas sales" that are yelling in our ear before today's presents are even unwrapped.

Yet, in the midst of all this shouting, we are called by a God who refuses to shout.

We are called by a God who whispers.

So we got out of our PJs and put down the hot chocolate this morning.

We found our way to these hard wooden pews, and for perhaps an hour or so, we seek a place of silence.

We seek a place to be still.

Why do we seek out this stillness?

Perhaps because only stillness brings that glimpse of the young couple, the woman heavy with child, who desperately needs a place for the night; that safe place to bring her newborn into the world, this child who will change everything we thought we knew about life.

Only stillness lets us eavesdrop on the astounded whisperings of shepherds who are encountered by — what was it?

A dream?

A vision of angels?

Announcing good news to the whole world:

That the distance between heaven and earth, the separation between the sacred and the profane, is now over — because in Jesus — heaven and earth at long last embrace, the sacred and the profane, finally kiss.

Only stillness brings us to the roadside where the magnificent Magi pass by, making their way on camelback from distant Iran to the small town of Bethlehem, symbolizing the unity of Jews and Gentiles — for now all people are God's people.

Only stillness allows us to see and hear that strange new prophet who talks about mustard seeds and salt and yeast, helping us to see that the sacred is infused in the ordinary, that every bush is aflame with the glory of God.

Only stillness brings us to the insight that the most important people on earth aren't the high and mighty, but the children, the hungry, the merciful; reminding us that God is not an angry old man in the sky just waiting to knock us down, but that God encounters us in love, with friendship.

Only stillness brings us to that mountaintop where thousands are listening to him, and at the end of the day those thousands are famished, yet amazingly, they eat until they can eat no more —

when a couple of loaves of bread and two fish are blessed, then shared, helping us to see that life is not rooted in scarcity, but in abundance.

Only stillness reveals the miracle happening to that fellow Lazarus, who died days ago, yet here he is!

Stumbling out of his tomb, still wearing the suit we buried him in, because, lo and behold, he's — alive; because in Christ, life has defeated death, finally and forever!

With all the beauty and majesty and awe that stillness reveals, we might wonder why we try so hard to avoid being still?

Perhaps we so often avoid times of stillness because the world around us seems so frightening.

With Ukraine on fire, with famine in Somalia, with Trump playing superhero on baseball cards.

Not to mention an economy having convulsions while bitter feuds over gender and race and political persuasions abound.

With the never-ending uncertainties of age and health — and even love.

But to these fears comes the gentle realization that the God who whispers is also the God who is Light.

The God of light that shines in every darkness.

And if we can allow ourselves these moments of stillness, we might find that in that stillness is a gift that meets, and defeats, every darkness in our times.

“And we may also find that we are given a gift to behold, and to then proclaim, a profound truth.

We might find the gift that speaks courageously, deliberately and defiantly against the darkness.

The gift that speaks against the darkness too often found in our own hearts.

The gift that subverts the darkness in our various communities.

For this gift proclaims, in the face of all darkness, that the light of the God who whispers – shines!” K. Barth, Sermons, 74-75. paraphrased.

Because the God who whispers is the God of Life, who frees us from our central conflict.

Which is not between body and soul.

It’s not between sex and chastity.

It’s not even between faith on the one hand, and the rat race of every day life, on the other hand.

No, our central conflict “is between complete freedom and complete bondage.” Barth, Dogmatics, II,4.

It is for our freedom that God becomes a vulnerable human being, subjecting himself to all of our limitations and weaknesses and fears.

Which means that "God doesn't become flesh to create a religion that condemns sexuality or the world we live in.

God becomes flesh to free us from our attachments and addictions to everything that is not alive!

God becomes flesh to liberate us from our endless love affairs with money, power and fame." Blue, From Stone to Living Word, 112. paraphrased.

God becomes flesh to liberate us from all the noise that surrounds us.

The noise that, once silenced, gives way to the gentle stillness that is God.

God meets us where we are.

In who we are.

As we are.

Maybe that's why we are here this morning.

With nary a Pajama nor hot chocolate in sight.

Perhaps we're here to ponder and worship.

And then to listen, with serenity and joy, to the gentle stirrings of the God who Whispers.

+amen

