

December 25, 2023

The Nativity of Our Lord—Christmas Day

John 1:1-14

Sharon's Christmas Prayer—John Shea from *The Hour of the Unexpected*

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA

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Testify to the Light

I have always taken Christmas Day very seriously. At least the church part of it. The festive part of Christmas Day, at least for me, has always started at around 11:00 on Christmas Day morning, my kids have never popped out of bed at the crack of dawn and been allowed to run downstairs, to the Christmas tree to tear open their presents. No, the present opening, Christmas Day festivities have always started later for them, after Christmas Day worship, so that I can be totally present for it. The gift I have asked my children for on Christmas Day over the years is an unnatural patience so that I can truly be present for our Christmas Day activities.

So, until Christmas Day worship is over, I have always taken Christmas Day very seriously, bringing it to it my exhaustion, unbuoyed by the adrenaline rush of the Christmas Eve crowds and the glow of soft candlelight, a light shining in the darkness.

To me, Christmas Eve has always been about atmosphere, Christmas Day has been about the harsh light of day, about the stark realities of the world, and the wonder and mystery of the Word becoming flesh. Christmas Day has been, for me, about theology, not about a story.

It has been good and glorious but it has not been cuddly. At least, not the church part of it.

A few years ago, a longtime member of Emmanuel asked me why I preached on Christmas Day. I asked why she asked. I mean, we're having a worship service. It's not lessons and carols. So, of course I would write a sermon and preach on Christmas Day. Then she told me that Pastor Saling didn't preach on Christmas Day.

She told me that he would find some writing about Christmas, a sermon, an essay, a reflection about Christmas, and he would read that in place of his sermon.

Wow! I thought. That sounded like a great idea.

She told me that just after the Christmas season of 2019, so I started planning for Christmas 2020. Of course, we all know what happened to our plans for 2020. They didn't turn out exactly how we had planned. But I remember the idea of readings for Christmas Day and we had our first "Readings and Carols" Christmas Day service.

It was lovely and that's what we did for the next two years, beautiful reflections on Christmas, that I, in my exhaustion, and sometimes too serious approach to Christmas, didn't have to write, poetry and wisdom from other authors, other preachers, other celebrators of Christmas combined with homemade music from Emmanuel's members and friends.

But this year, as I went searching for Christmas Day readings for this service, I couldn't find what I was looking for. At least not enough to fill up a service. So, I decided to go back to preaching on Christmas Day, perhaps for this year only, you never know what next year will bring. But part of the reason that I decided to go back to preaching this year was that I wanted to talk with you a little bit about one of the readings that I did find for the service of readings and carols that didn't happen this year.

I wanted to testify to the light.

Because in most of my Christmas Day sermons, I have framed the light, the Christmas Day daylight as a bad thing. A thing that forces us to face harsh realities that can easily be covered up in the hazy light of candlelight or the glow of a Christmas tree. In my imagination, the daylight of Christmas Day, exposing at it does the things that can be covered up in the dark, might dim the promise, dim of the light of Christ, shining in the darkness.

But what if it doesn't have to be like that. What if the light, the light of Christmas Day, is, in fact, the light of Christ, shining?

So, I'm going to share with you one of the readings, that I would have had us listen to in our service of readings and carols, if that were what we were doing today.

This poem, called *Sharon's Christmas Prayer* was shared by John Shea in his collection, *The Hour of the Unexpected*.

She was five, and
sure of the facts,
and recited them
with solemn solemnity,
convinced every word
was revelation.
She said
they were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
to eat
And they went a long way from home
without getting lost. The lady rode
a donkey, the man walked, and the baby
was inside the lady.
They had to stay in a stable
with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
But the Three Rich Men found them
because a star lited the roof.
Shepherds came and you could
pet the sheep but not feed them.

Then the baby was borned.
And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated
to silver dollars.
The baby was God.
And she jumped in the air,
whirled round, dove into the sofa,
and buried her head under the cushion
which is the only proper response
to the Good News of the Incarnation.

The only proper response to the incarnation! Joy! Joy that makes you want to jump and twirl and also hide your head under a pillow, because of the holiness and the amazement of it all, of God come to be with us.

I love this poem because it's a good reminder to me that Christmas Day doesn't have to be serious, a time for the difficult realities of the world, which is our daily diet. Instead, Christmas Day, can be a day for jumping and twirling, eyes wide in wonder as our children or our church or our friends or even our own hearts, tell us, not the joyful shouts of Christmas Eve, but in the holy, awestruck whispers of Christmas Day, that the baby, the baby we gathered to see at the manger last night, the baby that Mary said yes to, the baby that Joseph protected, the baby that angels announced, the baby that shepherds came to see, the baby the world had no room for, the baby was God! The baby is the light shining in the darkness, and even in the bright light of day, when every truth is exposed, cannot extinguish his brightness. The baby was God! The baby is God!

And that light, that light come into the world, that Word, become flesh for us, what if that is enough to light up not just the darkness of the world, but also the

harsh, unflattering light that hides nothing, that strips everything bare, and will not let us look away from the struggles and suffering of the world?

Could it be that the good news of Emmanuel, of the true light, which enlightens everyone, that has come into the world, is enough, not just for this day, but for all the days, knowing that God is with us, always, forever, no matter what, that God's yes is stronger than our no?

I've always taken Christmas Day very seriously, at least until around 11:00 o'clock or so, but this year, I will jump and spin and let my eyes grow wide in wonder, and not hide from holiness, but embrace it, the holiness that has hallowed even the broken places in our lives and in our world, which is, of course, the only proper response to the good news of the Incarnation.

It's Christmas Day. The baby is God. And I will testify to the light. Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas!