

Christmas Day – Church of the Ascension – 2021
The Rev. Gary Lawler

The LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.
In nomine+

It would be impossible for me to tell you how many times this situation has occurred with me. I'm standing at the door of the church, saying good-bye and Merry Christmas to parishioners as they file out the door following one of the Christmas services. A well-meaning soul shakes my hand (we could do that in the olden days!) usually a he, takes my hand in says, "Well, I bet you are glad that's over for another year!"

I can promise you that, that is the wrong thing to say to me, in any year. I usually smile and remind the person that Christmas Day is only the First Day of Christmas, and that there are still eleven more days to celebrate this august feast, not counting The Epiphany, at which time I would hope that the parishioner plans to return. Something like that, at least. If the eyes have not already glazed over, I might add that a good case can be made for extending the Christmas celebration through February 2nd. About half the time, the response has been: "Goundhog Day?" at which I have often simply quit the field in defeat, prepared, nevertheless to resume the discussion should it ever be raised, again.

This idea that Christmastime is the time from when the commercial interests begin advertising for the holidays (maybe as early as July!) ending on December 25 is so deeply ingrained in our American culture that it is almost impossible to counteract. For many years, while I was in Morrison at St. Anne's Church, I witnessed this societal truth first hand. After the Mass on Christmas morning, I would gather myself up for the hour-long trip to my parents' home in Freeport. On my way, I would witness piles of empty boxes, trash bags full of wrapping paper and quite often the corps of denuded, forlorn Christmas trees resting on the curb, awaiting garbage pick-up the next day.

You might think that I'm about to launch into a plea to please remember to keep the whole season of Christmas in mind, encouraging a full participation in all the days through the Epiphany which are so dear to the Anglican tradition. But, I'm not!

This morning, I'm focused on the meaning of Christmas. And by that I don't mean all the sentimental platitudes that are so much a part of the running commentary around Christmas. Not that kindness and generosity and forgiveness and good will are not part of the meaning of Christmas. But, I'd like to hone-in on the essence of scriptures we are called upon to ponder this morning. They direct us, not to babies, and shepherds and angels, but to the spiritual realities that are unleashed by the mighty work of God in behalf of his people which have changed their lives and transformed the human experience of the divine presence in their lives.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed the love and mercy of God as manifest in his intervention in the restoration of the people of Israel to their homeland after 70+ years in exile. The passage from the Letter to the Hebrews recounts past failures of God's people to discern his will and proclaims that, in love and mercy, God has sent his only son to be one with the humankind so that, from one of

their own, they might finally come to know the reconciling love that God extends to all his people, and even to the whole creation. The Gospel of John offers up a cosmic perspective that asserts that The Word, the means of direct communication by which God has always spoken to his people, has taken on flesh and blood and is now among them, to preach love, peace and salvation, transformative and spiritually expansive events, all.

This morning, the angels and shepherds have all gone away, and we are left to grapple with the immensity of the Mystery of the Incarnation, what we have labelled the theological consolidation of the Christ event. It is a most beloved theological concept that is historically dear to Anglicans. Some say that it is a residual influence from the Druid past, in which God's presence in the physical world was an assumed reality. But, there is no question that Emanuel, God with us, has been a tenant in Anglican thinking from its earliest days. That God, out of love, would become human, to dwell among us, to live as one of us and, perhaps as important, to die as one of us, confounds the understanding, and we are left only to celebrate and assimilate the parts of this life altering and affirming mystery that we are capable of understanding. He chose to be born of a woman, to grow and to learn, to gather friends and to teach, to confront challenges and disappointments, to be passionately obedient, and finally through his death, bring life to all, the other great mystery of our faith.

Our task, then, this Christmas and every Christmas, is to continue to celebrate this divine intervention which has transformed the meaning and purpose of all of human life from one of distance from and disobedience to the divine will, to one of proximity, closeness, at least partial understanding and attraction. It is true that this profound transformation began to be revealed in our time, in these later days, with the Annunciation to Mary and preceded over a period of approximately 33 years to manifest itself throughout our Lord's life and ministry, and conclude its revealing work with his glorious resurrection and ascension; a beginning point and an ending point that occurred in real time over two thousand years ago. Its truth is with us still. Real truth, holy truth is not altered by time or circumstance!

As contemporary disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, we need to keep this reality alive and active in our day to day lives. When we fall into the habit of thinking that the celebration of Christmas is a particular time of year, we overlook that fact that the truth it celebrates is eternal and constant in our lives, every day. This beginning of the revelation of the mystery of the incarnation is something we may celebrate at one particular time each year. But, the truth it reveals is with us always. To my mind, that makes every day a celebration of Christmas!

Merry Christmas! Amen!