

# *Christmas Presence*

**Isaiah 7:1-10    Matthew 1:18-25**

***Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church***

**December 23, 2007**

Christmas Day is almost upon us. I hope that you have been having a meaningful Advent.

Tomorrow evening we'll be greeting each other with the words: "Merry Christmas." I am mindful of persons with whom we have shared Christ's love as a Church.

I am thinking about Verna in New Orleans, whose house our workteam drywalled in October. I wonder how the work on her house has progressed since we last saw her and when she will be able to move out of the FEMA trailer and back into her home. I hope that she and her children and grandchildren are having will celebrating a merry Christmas together.

I am mindful of the Rodriguez family, with whom we have been able to share in giving and receiving. We do hope that this is a merry Christmas for all of them.

And I think of the those to whom we will go caroling this afternoon, who are not able to leave their home or their convalescent room. We pray that our visit with them will be a source of joy.

I hope that all these folks are feeling joy this Christmas, and I am grateful that our church has been able to share love in very real ways.

We are ones who have lit our candles in the darkness, and the followers of Jesus all around the globe have been lighting candles, joyfully sharing Christ's love with similar deeds. We cannot fathom the cumulative affect of all the genuine caring Christians have given this Christmas.

And yet, despite all the candles, we know that the darkness remains very real in our world, and we do not presume to insist that everyone must be merry this Christmas.

What about God's Christmas? Do you suppose it was a "merry" event?

Now of course one must be quite guarded and humble about painting a picture of God. Perhaps you heard the story of the Sunday School teacher looking over the shoulder of the young children busily doing art work. The teacher came to one young girl who was deep in thought over a blank piece of paper. "What are you going to draw a picture of," asked the teacher.

"I am going to draw a picture of God," said the girl.

"Oh, but no one knows what God looks like," remarked the teacher.

To which the girl replied, "They will when I finish drawing my picture."

Well, perhaps as we get older we loose some of our confidence about painting pictures of God. But allow yourself for a moment to imagine a rather traditional picture of God in Heaven. Heaven is a nice place, very comfortable I should think. And as we gaze into heaven for a moment, there we see God the Divine One, all powerful, omnipotent!

Then there is Christmas, the incarnation - God become flesh. This is a scene of which we have seen a lot of pictures. We have made our pictures very pretty. We love to

look at the manger scene. But one must admit that life in a manger is not near as comfortable as life in heaven.

I have had the extreme privilege of being present at the birth of each of my children. It was an ecstatic, miraculous event. But even in a modern hospital delivery room no one would dare call the experience "comfortable": not for the mother, not for the father, and certainly not for the newborn babe. For God, Christmas is the shock of birth into a different mode of existence: the human mode. This stable, this manger: they are not so comfortable. It is cold. It is risky. It is humbling.

"Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name 'Emmanuel', which means 'God With Us.'"

God was in Jesus. This is the mystery of our faith. Jesus was a human being, and we ponder; how could a man be God? But of equal mystery is the question: how is it that God could be a human being? We cannot answer the question how, but as we ponder this statement of faith, the profound significance of it becomes more and more obvious.

When we think of the person of Jesus we often think of a man who performed miracles. But the miracles are not as important as the fact that he was a human being, that he was, as Paul says, "descended from David according to the flesh," born of woman. The good news is that God loved us in a human being, and kept on loving even when it hurt.

The humanity of God is what allows us to celebrate Christmas in the midst of a world that is not very merry.

Sometimes people are critical of the Christmas season because they think it encourages people to expect too much. Kids expect too many gifts, families expect too much togetherness, the world expects too much peace, and if we don't look out we are all heading for a lot of holiday disappointments.

Be careful, we are warned, don't expect too much this Christmas, and then you won't be disappointed. But I think the opposite is true. We don't expect enough out of Christmas. What we need, and what God has promised, is a Christmas in which we all get our heart's desire, and it lasts forever.

I have met a number of people whose stated reason for moving to California or Arizona was in order to escape the snow, particularly shoveling it and driving in it. However, I heard a rather novel reason why one homeowner preferred to stay in the snow country. One good thing about the snow, he says, "is that it makes my yard look just as good as the neighbor's." A little bit of snow can make even the ugliest parts of the city look beautiful. But that beauty is only temporary, only 2 inches deep, little more than an illusion, a camouflage of reality.

That is what we sometimes expect out of Christmas, a mere camouflage. We sing "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas," and by that do we mean a Christmas which is for pretending, a brief time when I can ignore the harsh realities of life, pretend that the walls between other people and me have gone away, that peace is somehow closer than it was, that the pain of the world is for the moment numbed, that the pain in my own life is really only a dream, and this good feeling I have as I walk through the department stores listening to "holiday music" is going to stay with me the whole year.

But the Christmas you and I are hoping and waiting for this Advent is more than that - more than a thin white camouflage over the world's realities. It is salvation; it is good tidings to the afflicted; release of the prisoners; it is the healing of pain. *A real*

Christmas is more than a season when good feelings inspire us to a friendlier demeanor and a bit more generosity with our pocket books; it is an alteration of the present reality.

The first Christmas was not white, though it probably was cold. And we can be assured that it was no calm world on the night of Jesus' birth. The Middle East was as volatile then as it is now. Injustice reigned supreme. Those who still dared to hope yearned for the coming of God's Messiah.

But very few in number were those who took notice of the birth of one baby in Bethlehem. The real Christmas took place in the real world, a world just like the one we are living in today. And as God does come into the midst of our lives and our turmoil this Christmas, will we notice?

Today ... in Bethlehem, in Baghdad, in Los Angeles and in Culver City there are some people who are not feeling very merry. They perhaps don't feel like preparing for a celebration of joy. But I doubt that Mary was really excited about journeying from Galilee to Bethlehem late in her pregnancy and then giving birth in a stable. The world did not feel like rejoicing, but God came anyway.

God is coming into our world, just as it is. In the midst of our troubled human existence, there is God. That is the basis of our Christian hope as we prepare for another Christmas celebration. Because of the humanity of God, because God entered into our human existence in Jesus Christ, we have the sure hope of a new existence, a new life, a new reality which is even now taking the place of the old one.

I think it is well stated in these words by Christopher Fry:

"The darkest time in the year,  
The poorest place in town,  
Cold, and a taste of fear,  
Man and woman alone,  
What can we hope for here?  
More light than we can learn,  
More wealth than we can treasure,  
More love than we can measure,  
Because one child is born. ...  
because God is with us!