



WELCOME BACK

Christmas Eve || 4pm Family Service with Choir & 7 pm Service with music || St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Isaiah 62:6-12; Titus 3:4-7; Psalm 97; Luke 2:1-20 || The Rev'd Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

Merry Christmas! Thank goodness you are here, and we can spend a few minutes sorting through this holiday miracle!

How are we to fully understand – and inwardly digest – that God – ruler of the universe, creator of heaven and earth – loved humans so very much that God decided to take on human form, to be born as each of us was born – [except, I'm going to hazard a guess that none of us was born in a barn – I know we have at least one church member who was born in a speeding vehicle enroute to a hospital, but again – that vehicle was not speeding toward a barn as the intended destination.]

So, how on this glorious Christmas Eve can we understand that the Christmas story is a story of God's indefatigable love for us that became incarnate in the baby Jesus? A baby, just like we were at birth, or like our miraculous little ones who have come into our families – a vulnerable baby, who depended on his earthly mother Mary and father Joseph to keep him warm, fed, safe and alive!

We gather in community today to check in with one another to revisit the story and to say – can you believe it? That really happened – and THANK GOD everyone kept talking about this mystical and miraculous event – as far as we know – *a once ever in human history event*. I am grateful that you are here so that we can revisit it once again and find

the joy and light of Jesus' birth just as refreshing, grounding and awe-inspiring as did the original participants in the Christmas Story – it is amazing, and exciting that we get to read, sing and pray about our origin story, as a community.

Earlier this month, our St. Andrew's community participated in Hanover's Four Corners Winter Festival. We opened our doors to sell cookies, to offer warmth and musical entertainment for all of our friends and neighbors who stopped by and this year, we added an opportunity for anyone who was interested to share with us their prayer requests. Writing down our prayers, and praying them silently or aloud is powerful.

Folks wrote about health struggles, pleas for family members, safe travels and the relief from grief or sadness. Some wrote about ancient heart breaks, others about missing loved ones at the holidays. One family was particularly sad to be heading into the holidays without their Great Grandfather – or Big Grampa – as the children named him. Some of the festival's participants spoke with me directly and offered confessional prayers or pointed requests for God's intercession. Each felt like a blessed and holy insight into what was on people's hearts in advance of today.

One young girl, who overheard me inviting our guests to write down their prayers, stood at my side and asked, "What is a prayer?" which got my attention immediately. She was probably 6 years old and looked like she would stay rooted in that exact spot until I answered her question.

She listened intently as I offered that prayer is a conversation that we can have with God, to ask for things that we need or want, or to share things that are hard for us, or to invite God to celebrate with us in our excitement for something good or wonderful that has happened in our lives.

She took this in, and said she wanted to write one herself. Then she corrected herself and said, "actually, will you help me write my prayer?" and now I was captivated and delighted. So we made sort of a big deal of awaiting her prayer request. I thought she was being quiet to sort out wording or her wishes, and then she announced, "I wish God would come back." I let this hang in the air for a minute – the festival goes swirling all around us and the music sounding fantastic from the front of the sanctuary. I scootched down so we could see eye to eye, thinking that I'd found a great way in to see what was

on this peanut's heart that she needed God to help sort out, I asked: "well, what would you say to God if God came back?" She looked at me, put her pencil down. I'm afraid she actually put her hand on her hip as she gave me this almost pitying look and said –shaking her head as though answering the dumbest if not most obvious question in the world, she responded with obvious exasperation, "I'd say – Welcome Back!"

This simple – and polite refrain has echoed in my head since she said it. Baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem. What do we say? Welcome Back! Welcome Back Baby Jesus. And...welcome back any of you who are joining us in person or on-line for the first of many or are long-time visitors or parishioners. Welcome Back! Welcome to Christmas 2024, which includes the same miraculous story of the savior of the world being born to a young, inexperienced and wonderfully faithful couple. Welcome back to the witness of the shepherds who traveled through the night, whose path was lit by a shining star shining over Bethlehem. Perhaps its not as complicated as some of us adults tend to make it!

Welcome back to the reminder that Herrod sent out a decree that there would be a census, so our biblical forebearers returned to their home villages so that they could be counted – which meant that every Inn and lodging place was full when Joseph guided their donkey and the due-any-minute Mary to where they had to stop – in the only place in town that could accommodate them. They had each been visited by an Angel of the Lord who assured them that they were on the right path and that they were to expect this holy miracle. They would parent God's only son – making them, no doubt, excited AND nervous – yet we would understand if their faith became a bit tattered when they were made to set up housekeeping and birthing their son in a stable.

After the blessed event of the birth of the Christ child, they welcomed company – they were visited by those faithful Shepherds who were doing what the angel of the Lord told them to do. The shepherds traveled to worship the Messiah who was to be found wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The shepherds, who must have been amazed at that they found exactly what the angel said they would, retold Joseph and Mary what the angel who had appeared to them had said.

Mary treasured the shepherds' words and pondered them in her heart. Don't we think they are ponderous words? AND wouldn't you be **relieved** to have the startling

proclamations of an angel affirmed by others to whom the angel appeared? Wouldn't that provide Joseph and Mary with the comfort of knowing – Oh yes, that REALLY did happen.

More people came to visit the Christ child and Mary and Joseph, and they kept talking about it. News of the miracle spread. People undoubtedly checked in with one another, which is nearly always good idea – to check a profound experience or mystical insight or realization out with others – to check it in community. This baby's birth was the answer to their prayers – and the prayers of their ancestors.

Thank God, they kept talking about it, checking in about it. Friends and prophets would later write about this mystical experience, so that we, gathered in this beautiful sanctuary more than 2000 years later can also look on with wonder and gratitude at the extravagant incarnation of God's love, made known to us in a baby in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

How can we modern people fully understand such a miraculous and wonderful gift? How can we let the love and light of that ancient baby's birth pierce our hearts or bolster our spirits more than two millennia later?

Well, based on my six year old friend's reaction – we don't have to make it too too complicated. We can just say, Welcome Back baby Jesus. Welcome into our living rooms this Christmas, welcome at our tables and in the pews at church. Welcome into our hearts. This answer to our ancestors' prayers, and to our own, those spoken and written here in community – welcome back.

May God's incarnate love and incandescent light carry us through this season and be made obvious to each of us, so that we in turn may faithfully follow the Christmas story and become for each other, the embodiment of God's love. Amen+