

A Sermon Delivered by
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Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2008

Tonight we come to the manger, and witness the birth of Jesus. It is a special time, and an occasion filled with the anticipation of memories and hopes, and the expectation of dreams and possibilities. It also comes at one of the darkest times of the year, a few days after the winter solstice, and as such, we look for the light and warmth that this birth represents and brings to the wider religious community.

Like most preachers and clergy during the preceding season of Advent, I have been reminding people that we need to keep Christ in Christmas, and prepare for the birth of Jesus with a seriousness of purpose that is fitting for our religious convictions, as well as being in line and in accord with our cherished scriptural doctrines. This year, even though we live in politically-correct times and take great pains to separate church from state, I have come to see in a new and perhaps challenging way that Christmas (which is simply a shortened form of the phrase "Christ Mass") permeates our popular culture. Consider the following phrases, for example, that have come to our attention recently.

One of the most familiar seasonal greeting alternatives to "Merry Christmas" is "Happy Holidays." But the word holiday itself, is a shortened form of the phrase "holy day" – so we are still left with the need to explain exactly what makes these holidays so "holy." Seasons Greetings is no better, for it begs the question regarding what season we are talking about. Once we determine which phase of the church year we're referring to (whether it be Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Pentecost, or whatever) we need to ascertain "why" we are wishing others well because of it. At this time of year particularly, Christmas as a season marked by twelve days in the church calendar, is about the birth of Jesus, and it is natural that we choose to share our joy with friends and neighbors about a newborn in the family.

So what are we to conclude from all the preparations of Advent, all the Christmas Cards we've sent, all the email attachments and blogs posted on the Internet, and all the caroling and singing of Christmas music? What is it about this night that seems so special? We have decorated the church and turned Saint Peter's into a beautiful setting so that we might come to the altar and celebrate the Eucharist offered in honor of Jesus, the one called Christ.

Let me suggest that once again this year the meaning of Christmas is about peace on earth, and goodwill toward all. Jesus said to his disciples – I call you friends, and to all of us who are his disciples thousands of years later, he calls us to be both friends and peacemakers. Friendship and Peacemaking are both aspects of divine work. And Peace in particular at Christmas-time means reconciliation and amendment of our lives as people of God.

This is not a time for preaching an exhortation on good behavior. That will come in due season later on during Lent. But we are reminded even on this glorious eve - a "silent night: holy night" - as the angels announce the wondrous news from the heavens, that we are about to be transformed and changed in our own awareness and appreciation of this moment. Christmas is about peace, not just the absence of strife or conflict; but peace in a much wider sense - peace of mind, peace of spirit, peace in our hearts, and yes, peace on earth, good will towards all.

And it follows the good news this most holy night of nativity is that we have a hand in playing out our role as peacemakers in the world, because of our devotion and appreciation of the Christ-child born in a stable. It begins tonight with a manger in Bethlehem. It begins in our hearts as we reflect on these wonderful and mysterious events. And it begins again in the world 2000 years later, after the fact, as the Christ-child enters our consciousness and seeks to transform who we are as people of God.

O Come All Ye Faithful.

Joyful and Triumphant, Come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.

Come and behold him, born the king of Angels

O Come Let us Adore Him, O Come Let us Adore Him ... Christ the Lord

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN