

Christmas 2020  
St. Peter's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Emily Richards

*Incarnating the Incarnation*

So, he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.  
And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.  
It started in low. Then it started to grow.  
But the sound wasn't sad! Why, this sound sounded merry!  
It couldn't be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!  
He stared down at Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes!  
Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!  
Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,  
Was singing! Without any presents at all!  
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!  
Somehow or other, it came just the same!

After forty plus years of watching this holiday classic, I admit I still get a little misty eyed when all those Whos down in Whoville gather around the Christmas tree as the sun dawns over the snowy landscape. Singing their hearts out with great jubilation! Dr. Seuss' poetry echoes the good news we proclaim this night. The message of the angels pierced a darkened sky and a darkened world 2000 years ago just as it pierces our darkened world even now. Christmas comes every year. It comes in times of joy and sorrow, in prosperity and peace, and in times of suffering and sickness. Even with empty pews, no children wandering the aisles as shepherds or dancing in circles as angels, even with our dinner tables smaller this year, our celebrations tinged with feelings of isolation, Christmas has come. In the time of Covid, with a stubborn and audacious hope we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation: God is with us.

The Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, Bishop of the Diocese of Washington reminds us, that "However you celebrate Christmas this year, never lose sight of the spiritual power at the heart of this season: Jesus comes to us where we are, as we are. He is not afraid of the mess we all too often make of things. For all the beauty of our celebrations, remember

that Jesus was born in harsh, dangerous circumstances. We celebrate his birth not because it all happened perfectly, but because everything wasn't perfect. Imperfection is where God chose to come and chooses still."

The Nativity story reveals a God who has entered our world exactly as it is, and exactly how you and I are, in our messy, imperfect humanity. God did not enter a world we often wish it would be – the sentimental, sanitized, Christmas card, snow covered suspended reality of Christmas. As pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it: "God slipped into the vulnerability of skin." This year in particular we need to rejoice in the truth of this message. As Christians we live on the edge of dawn, where light and darkness, beginnings and endings, life and death intermingle with each other. Embracing the hope born in a stable in Bethlehem emboldens us to walk in the darkest places as witnesses to the light.

This Advent I participated in a global online Advent Calendar called #Advent Word. If you follow St. Peter's on Facebook or Instagram you've probably seen some of my posts. #AdventWord provides a daily meditation on a word and a visual image and invites personal reflections through social media to share one's own Advent journey. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the word of the day was wisdom and immediately I knew what image to post. One of our beloved Frank Toia. Check it out. It's a great picture of Frank waving his hands enthusiastically in the pulpit. In the seasons of Advent and Christmas we remember those we love but see no longer. Those whose lives have shaped ours. And who made our celebrations what they are today. Frank was a friend, a fellow sojourner, and my priest. He will remain for me an icon of spiritual wisdom. There are many stories I could tell of Frank and of his witness to the light of Christ's love and reconciliation. Stories about his ministry as a parish priest, his interfaith work or his faithful partnership with our companions in Guatemala. But it's the way he lived at the end of his life that I want to share with you tonight.

Frank's illness changed everything for him. As most illnesses do. He went from being a very active, energetic seventy-something retired priest to a man who spent extended periods of time in and out of hospitals. The years he struggled with his illness did diminish his physical well-being, but not his spiritual well-being. In fact, his world widened, his heart continually open to new encounters with the divine through those who were put on his path. When I visited him at the hospital in my official role as his priest, I would be invited into his sanctuary filled with candles, an altar, a Guatemalan

altar cloth and symbols of his journey as well as others'. Christians, Muslims, atheists, anyone who walked into his room were welcomed into this holy space. Frank knew everyone's name. Listened with compassion to their stories. Blessed doctors, janitors and nurses' aides. And in return they showered him with prayers and blessings. Entering Frank's sanctuary, one dwelled at the edge of dawn, where light and darkness, beginnings and endings, life and death intermingled with each other. In Frank's presence you knew you were also in the presence of the Holy One: Immanuel, God with us. In those precious days of living and dying, Frank Toia incarnated the Incarnation.

The birth of Jesus was not a one-time event that happened long ago among shepherds and angels. Christ is born anew in each and every one of us. Christ is born anew each time one of us incarnates his way of love. As Mary, and my friend the Rev. Frank Toia bore witness to, you and I can join them as Christ-bearers in the world. What better way to live the one, precious, beautifully imperfect life we've been given? But to stand at the edge of dawn and rejoice in the message of the angels. Emmanuel. God is with us. Christmas has come.

In the words of the poet Madeleine L'Engle,  
He did not wait till the world was ready,  
till men and nations were at peace  
He came when the Heavens were unsteady  
and prisoners cried out for release.  
He did not wait for the perfect time.  
He came when the need was deep and great.  
He dined with sinners in all their grime,  
turned water into wine. He did not wait  
till hearts were pure. In joy he came  
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.  
To a world like ours, of anguished shame  
He came, and his Light would not go out.  
He came to a world which did not mesh,  
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.  
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh  
the Maker of the stars was born.  
We cannot wait till the world is sane

to raise our songs with joyful voice,  
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,  
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice! Amen.

*Inspiration for this sermon came partly due to the great theologian Jurgen Moltmann's ideas in his book,  
The Theology of Hope.*