

Day of the Nativity of Our Lord
December 25, 2020
John 1:1-14
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The Holy Family lashed to a tree is one of the more unusual sights I've seen in the neighborhood this December. Mary is cradling Baby Jesus while Joseph hovers protectively over both of them, and there's white cord tethering Joseph and Mary to the tree trunk they're propped against. Kinda odd – not noticeable from a car, just to those who walk by. Yesterday in the midst of pretty strong wind gusts, I thought, "Good thing they're tied down or they'd end up in England!"

I got to thinking: do I lash Joseph, Mary and Jesus to a tree? Do I tie down the Christmas story to only this time of year? Do I hobble the Holy Family by taking them out of the picture once the tree comes down? At Christmas we can express our faith by sending religious Christmas cards, by including a Nativity scene as part of our decorations, by worshiping, even when the experience is virtual rather than in-person. As we look toward the year of our Lord 2021, how can I **continue** to express my faith in the incarnate Lord, the Word made flesh? How can I not put Him away in a box in the attic till next December? How can I follow Charles Dickens' advice to "keep Christmas in [my] heart all year"?

Some folks may feel like they missed out completely **this** year. "We're not having Christmas." How many times have we heard that this season, from family or friends or coworkers? Of course, we know what they **mean**: "We're not getting together to eat, to exchange presents, to do what we usually do TOGETHER." COVID precautions have changed **a lot** of our holiday traditions – including worshiping TOGETHER, in person. Mother Nature scotched yesterday's hoped-for 4 p.m. opportunity to do just that....

But of course, the reality is that despite everything that is definitely NOT happening, we will always “have Christmas.” In December and year ‘round. Because we will always have our Christ. Maybe the peeling away of some of the layers of the **secular** onion of holiday cheer this year will allow us to see more clearly the **spiritual** heart of the matter: “To **you** is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Martin Luther said that YOU is one of the most important words in the whole Christmas story. Because if the Savior was not born for YOU, for ME, for ALL OF US – what’s the point?? If this were not MY Savior, then I wouldn’t have a heart connection to the holyday, only a so-so, ho-ho connection to the holiday.

In our Christmas Day Gospel, St. John talks not about the Babe of Bethlehem but about the Word with a capital W. We’re not talking two-dimensional letters on a page vs. a bouncing baby Boy. St. John means the **living** Word who became human and introduced us to the Father. Jesus is the description-in-action of the Father’s love. This weekend we’ll sing these beautiful words (with a small w):

Of the Father’s love begotten,
E’er the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega.
He, the Source and Ending, he....

Those words about our Lord Jesus come from the Lord’s own lips in the Book of Revelation: “I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End.” (Revelation 22:13)

I like to add, “and everything in between!” Our Lord, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is **present** for it **all**. He’s not just there **at** the beginning and **at** the end. He’s with us for the whole ride! He journeys with us. Most Decembers that would include journeying with us to crowded malls for Christmas shopping. This year it’s more like traveling with us to crowded urgent care centers for COVID tests. Most Decembers it would mean sitting with us among family and friends at holiday parties.

This year most of us have scaled way back and don't even have to add leaves to the table, unless it's to provide social distancing for the few who **are** sitting there!

Our Jesus is here, regardless. Our joy is complete, despite everything that might threaten to fray its edges and tear at its heart. For **the Gift is Given**, irrevocably, eternally:

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:6*

He's the living Word, the best description ever of who our God is: Loving Kindness incarnate, Forgiver of sins, Vanquisher of death! The Son is "the light that shines in the darkness" (John 1:5), the light that the darkness will never overcome, the **Good** News that no **bad** news will ever overwhelm. This God-light sometimes looks like lantern-light in a stable, the heavenly shining of a star, the glint of sun on water as our Lord is baptized in the Jordan. Sometimes this God-light is a blaze of glory, the blinding brilliance of Resurrection. Mostly, though, God-light is Christ-light the Holy Spirit enables you and me to reflect when we **don't** box up Christ and put him in the attic along with the other Christmas decorations. God-light is the Christ-light we shed when we **don't** tie the Good News to one season of the year, when we **don't** hobble our faith by treating the Christmas story like a lovely but long-past tale.

"**Merry** Christmas!" may not roll off our tongues as readily as usual this year, especially if we're talking to someone we know is struggling. But "merry" doesn't actually mean "happy" in the sense of an eggnog toast or a sparkling tree or a "Melakalikamaka" kind of way. "Merry" actually means blessed, peaceful --which I always feel is the special gift of Christmas morning worship, but

even moreso the gift of our Savior.... He gives the peace that comes from sins forgiven, life renewed, Heaven assured.

Let's "keep Christmas in our hearts all year" by living out faith-active-in-love in **all** seasons. When we feel buffeted by the winds of change, may we trust that the Holy Spirit, the divine Wind of God, is blowing away what's no longer necessary and rearranging the essentials for our fullness of life. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham