

*"It was not the Christmas Eve service I wanted.
It's not the Christmas I wanted. But ... [still] thankful
to have been in my church listening to music, if only for a few minutes."*

That's a Facebook post from a dear St. Paul's parishioner written last Christmas. Those days when vaccines were just beginning to be rolled out and COVID deaths were approaching 9/11-like totals, every day.

Back then, it didn't feel prudent to gather like this. So we released a fancy (for us) Christmas video. We had a lighted labyrinth on the North Lawn, and welcomed folks into church for short intervals we called "pilgrimages".

It wasn't the Christmas Eve service we might've wanted. It wasn't the Christmas we wanted. But it was the context in which we found ourselves, and we were thankful (or tried to be thankful) just the same.

Here we are this year with some semblance of a fuller Christmas schedule. Even with ropes on the pews and windows cracked open to the chill, we're here. *We're together. We're incarnate.* And, through God's eternal time and space, I include our friends on the livestream and later.

Even so, those of us here tonight in the flesh hold a special privilege. We're here on behalf of those who can't be. Those separated by the miles. Those loved ones so dearly missed. Those who are immunocompromised or have immunocompromised loved ones. Unvaccinated children, and so forth. We're here tonight for them.

That's how the incarnation works. God sent Jesus in the flesh for us and for all creation, initially, to a small, representative group – a young couple, shepherds, and a bunch of animals on a starry night.

It may not have looked like all that much at the time. Even that heavenly host knew to reassure them not to be afraid.

But it made a difference.

God's Word becoming flesh forever changed this broken world God so loves.
And it hearkens change in us too,
telling us that we are the Body of Christ, God's Word made flesh, in our flesh.

During the four weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas,
our Church School students met, socially distanced and masked,
in Wilkinson Hall. They began each class by taking strands of straw and
placing them in the manger,
sharing something good and kind (I'd call it *holy*) that they'd done that week.

"I helped my mom or dad with a chore." "I didn't yell at my little brother."
"I picked out a toy for the Holiday for Giving donation."
"I played with someone no one else wanted to play with."
Sure, kid stuff. But the incarnation is *always contextual*.

Jesus the Christ didn't come into some idealized world, but this one –
with animals in dirty stalls and people who are afraid.
Jesus God incarnate didn't come to obliterate our humanity, but redeem it.
To show us how to live and especially love, here and now.

I love that our manger was not just put together, however carefully,
by a responsible adult, but crafted by children over a period of weeks.
"Padded with love" as Miss Frances wrote in tonight's Way of Love word,
which I encourage you to read.

But we know that God's love cannot be contained.
Baby Jesus soon left that manger, scooped up into his young mother's tender embrace.
Morning came and they likely left for Nazareth,
where Jesus grew up and learned the trade of carpentry from Joseph.
Jesus learned and taught scripture at the temple.
And, in time, he healed the sick, fed the hungry, welcomed the outcast.
Jesus, God incarnate, met people where they were.
And then sent them out to *be* God's Word made flesh for others.

One of the little joys of this strange pandemic period,
is asking parishioners to send in photos of themselves worshiping at home.
Themselves (or their pets) wearing red for Pentecost or purple for Advent.
Sometimes pictures of home altars they've made.
I'm so touched by how artifacts from St. Paul's pop up in these photos.
You might see a Prayer Book or Bible received at Confirmation.
More often it's something smaller and more routine.

A palm cross or a holding cross. A plain white candle.
A crumpled StarWord from years ago.

You never know what's going to speak to people.
What little, seemingly insignificant, tactile thing is going to
remind someone of God's presence and power in their lives.
God's presence *empowering* their lives to incarnate God's love where they are.

Jesus didn't stay in that manger forever. He meets us where we are.
He forms a community to be the Body of Christ,
and nourishes us through the Body of Christ in communion.

So let's lift up the Christ Child, literally and figuratively, from that manger.
Let's go forth from this place tonight renewed and resolved
to incarnate his life in our lives.

Be inspired by those Church School kids who "padded" this manger with love
out of the simple stuff of their good deeds and acts of mercy in His name.

At communion, I'm going to lift up baby Jesus and place him
on the Holy Table, for he is the host of that heavenly banquet.
And then, we'll bring that manger down the chancel stairs
and invite you to complete the loop begun by our children.
Carry the love and good deeds they've shared back out into the world.

As you come up for communion, take a strand of straw from the manger.
I can see it tucked into a wallet or purse, or wedged behind the visor in your car.
Or maybe it'll end up in your home altar, or placed in your nativity scene.
Whatever works in your context.

Wherever it lands, let it urge you to incarnate God's love in Jesus.
Be the Body of Christ where you are.
May it help you hear the angels' counsel to not be afraid.
And, humble as it is, may it signify that God is with us, God is with *you*,
and -- through you -- for all of creation.

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