

The Christmass, December 25, 2008: St. Francis, and St. Stephen's.

Father Bob sends his greetings *and his* regrets but because of the weather, the threat of another Wolf Creek Pass closing, and a health situation, he is not able to be with us tonight. He is truly sorry because he was looking forward to celebrating the Christ Mass with us. This is the message that he would have shared with you tonight.

In the name of the One who creates, the One who redeems and the One who makes Holy: Amen

“And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the lord appeared to them and said: “Do not be afraid. For lo, I bring you tidings of great joy for unto you is born this night in the city of David a Savior, who is the Christ, the Lord.” [Luke 2: 8-10]

And so begins the most wonderful story of all, the story of the Birth of Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer. We began to relive this story four weeks ago on the First Sunday of Advent. During

this Advent season, we have recognized the many intertwining themes of this complicated season. For Advent is truly a season, rich in traditions that have been developed over the centuries to help us prepare for the joyous happening that we call the Christmass Event: the birth of a child more than 2000 years ago in a small town, in a small country so far away. But this is a Birth that has transcended time and space and today we celebrate an event which not only gives meaning to creation, but it also gives meaning to who **we** are as individuals, as a Child of God, and as followers of Christ.

One sure sign of recognizing an Episcopalian is our *appropriate* insistence to keep on wishing everyone a Merry Christmass – days **after** *Christmass Day*, in fact right up to January 6, *The Feast of the Epiphany*. We truly celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmass. For us Christmass is not just a day, but it is a season, a Holy Season. So it is our practice to continue to contemplate the Mysteries of the Birth Event and the significance of this Holy Time.

Last Sunday, if we had read the Matthew alternative for the Gospel lesson, we would have heard the story of how the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Joseph and hear him announce: *“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’ ”*

“God is with us.” This is the ultimate meaning of our celebration tonight, the ultimate meaning of Christmass, and it is the ultimate meaning of our lives as Christians. For tonight we celebrate the *Incarnation*, the birth of Jesus, that event in which God breaks into history at a specific time and in a specific place for the sole purpose of bringing salvation to all humanity. This is our focus, especially tonight, and it must be the focus of our lives

as Christians. We are remembering and celebrating that "*God is with us.*"

Advent holds before us the coming of God's Kingdom in Jesus of Nazareth and the expectation that He will come again in power and glory to judge the living and the dead. Tonight we celebrate that coming for *Emanuel, God is with us*, is the good news of Christmass. We are reminded tonight that God's kingdom has already come in Jesus, and His kingdom is in us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This provides us security, comfort, and hope in the midst of our insecure world.

I think that too often we do not recognize or notice that "*God is with us*" for He shows Himself in so many ways – that if we aren't careful, we just might miss Him. Let me share with you the words of Caroline Ellender, the Director of the Children's Program of the Stewpot Ministry in Jackson, Mississippi, which she shared in this year's Christmass newsletter.

"Last Wednesday was a very hard afternoon at the skating rink – it was the most accident-prone afternoon we've ever had! I

spent the afternoon running around nursing hurt elbows, bumped heads, upset tummies and bruised feelings. Finally I got on the bus, tired and ready for the ride back to Stewpot. Little Ced, one of the tiniest children in our After School Program leaned over his seat as I sat down and whispered amid all the noise, "I love you." I stopped short and looked at this adorable face, Oh how I needed that! It was the breath of fresh air and encouragement that I needed to get through the day.

Later that night as I was thinking about Little Ced's toothless grin and his sweet words, I was reminded of two things. The first is that I truly feel the presence of God in the Children's Program. As I minister to these little ones, I am also ministered **to** through them. It never fails that when I need to know God's love, one of our children gives me a smile, a hug or some kind word. The second is that this incident seems to express in a lot of ways the Christmas season.

We run around bustling here and there running from one task to the next. And in all the chaos God is waiting in the most unexpected places (sitting on a big yellow bus in my case) to whisper in our ear, "I love you." God reminds us of His great and immense love in these quiet moments and encourages us to continue this journey. In all the hustle and bustle of this holiday season, I hope that we can all stop and hear God's quite whisper and find the "little Ceds" in the world." [Unquote]

"God is with us" and we do find Him and His message in the most unusual places. Let me use another and rather unexpected example. I am an avid reader of Sunday comic strips. I read them all. I do have my favorites, of course, but I read all of the cartoons. One Sunday a couple of years ago, I found, clipped out and saved a great Advent and Christmas message in the cartoon *B.C.* by Johnny Hart. In this one, we find the ant characters in school and the teacher announces: *"And now class, Heeeeere's Johnny!"* In the next and following frames, we see Johnny reading from his paper:

"There is a time for every purpose under heaven.

A time to laugh,

A time to cry.

A time to try appeasin'.

A time to live.

A time to die.

"A reason for the season."

A time for the strong.

A time for the weak.

A time to be bold.

A time to be meek.

A time for reflection.

A time for doubt

To wonder what life is all about.

A time to seek

And then find out:

It's God's good grace that frees us.

To know that the season is really about --The blessed birth of Jesus."

What a wonderful message, from a most unexpected source, to remind us that "*God is with us*" and that this season is all about the *Incarnation*: the blessed birth of Jesus.

This year, undoubtedly, our thoughts in this Christmass Season are impacted by the terrible events in our world: Iraq, Afghanistan, the troubles in several of the nations of Africa, and the national and international financial crisis to mention only a few. All these things remind us of just how fragile and tentative our lives are.

These events are **also** a poignant reminder of just how important it is for us to share the message and love of God as expressed in Christ. How appropriate and timely is this message of love – for Christmass is the season of love. For in Christ, love has come into the world to transform the world. **And that transformation must begin with each one of us.** If we cannot change ourselves, then how can we ever possibly change our

world? Let me paraphrase the message from one of my daily devotional books: 'Love came into the world to show us how to bless and how to be open to blessings. With a new awareness of this love, we must open the "manger of our hearts and souls" to let love be born again in each of us. Love heals us and renews us. Love encourages the best in and from us. Love shines brightly, revealing the promises contained in every situation. Love is reborn in us today and by a celebration of heart and soul, we must proclaim and live the love of God, expressed through His Son, Jesus Christ.'

Yes, *Emanuel*, // "*God is with us*," // but this is not just a comforting thought: it is a cry of victory; it is a call to ministry; it is the meaning of Christmass. Let us go forth from here tonight celebrating the birth of Jesus and the birth of a **new** realization of the love and peace that He brings and that we now celebrate in our hearts and in our lives.

Emanuel, God is with us. So let it be.

Amen