

Christmas Eve Late Service, 2020. The Luke Nativity.

This Christmas has not been stripped down to its essentials. It has been stripped down much further than that. If we had to make a list of Christmas things to do without, I would not include family and friends, and I certainly would not include the body of Christ, gathered together or in the Eucharist. And for many of us, more of us than usual, this Christmas comes at the end of a year when we have lost so much and so many people. I am especially aware tonight of you who are experiencing a first Christmas without some beloved person, making this holy night feel like something to be endured, rather than celebrated. We do not, in fact, do ourselves any favors by pretending that this Christmas isn't diminished.

Not just the trimmings, but some of the real essentials are missing. And so in a year like this, on a Christmas like this, what is left? What is the immutable promise of Christmas that not even 2020 can take away from us? At the end of this year, let us at least be honest. It is not that God will solve all of our problems. It is not necessarily that God will deliver us from what harms us in time. It is not even, I'm afraid, that we're all going to be okay. Terrible and beautiful things will happen, and if they all have reasons, we don't have access to those. Later, at Easter, we'll receive the promise that in the long cosmic arc of God's work, all will be redeemed, made meaningful and holy and beautiful and whole. But not at Christmas. At Christmas, the promise is something just as deep and powerful, but not as broad.

The promise of Christmas is that God has come to dwell with us, and that nothing can part us from God's presence and love. God has become one of us and will never leave us. God is here on the fringes of an empire, among an oppressed people, in a stable on a dark night with an unwed mother far from home. God is here among the poor and the neglected, the young revolutionaries, the befuddled but good natured craftsmen. God is here as we gather our households around us in the quiet dark, or reach out by phone and zoom to beloveds we cannot touch, or lean back and remember Christmases past that now cannot come again. Among our physicians and nurses undergoing unimaginable daily risk and trauma, among retail workers trying to hold their breath for a ten hour shift on minimum wage.

Because God was born there in a barn, God is here wherever we are—in the empty church with a weary priest and in a home a mother has worked frantically to fill with cheer because she cannot fill it with people.

The promise of Christmas is Immanuel, God with us. Wherever we are, however we are, God is here. And that doesn't immediately make all the problems go away. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, but Herod is not cast down from his throne, much less Quirinius or Augustus. Mary is still not given a room, the whispers about her inconvenient pregnancy do not stop, she is no closer to home. The shepherds come and marvel, but when they go away they don't have more money or even necessarily get off of the graveyard shift. Jesus is born, and the world is changed forever, but in quiet. Nothing and everything has changed, that night and tonight. He is born and

will grow, slowly and quickly like all children, with sleepless nights that last forever and years that pass in a moment. Jesus is born but the virus isn't gone overnight, our rulers don't become just, our beloveds aren't any closer to us.

But Jesus is born. The light has come into the night, and the night will not overcome it. God is now with us and will never leave us—in our fear, in our weariness, in our grief: Immanuel. And also, my friends, in our very real joy, and our love, and our hope. Joy and love and hope that Jesus causes, shields, and sustains. God has come to us, here, where everything still looks the same. And everything has changed. Amen.