

"The Meeting Ground."

Luke 2:1-20

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

Rev. David E. Young

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008

The room we are in tonight is known by various names. In some traditions it is called the Nave. In others it is the Sanctuary. In some it is simply "church". In New England it might be called the Meeting House.

It is a beautiful space, a holy place.

This is the place where we meet up with friends and fellow followers of Christ. It is also a place where we meet up with God.

It is not a chance meeting. God has chosen to meet us in the flesh, in the Word Incarnate, Immanuel: "God with Us."

God does not stand aloof, watching our feeble attempts to get God's attention. Rather, it is God who works overtime to get our attention.

This is the same God who has traveled with his people in earlier times - as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night through the Sinai wilderness. This is the same God who in Christ says, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." This is the God who is as near to us as breath - a very present help at all times. God with us. Immanuel.

And this is also the God who is for us - the angel says to the shepherds: "for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior". This is the God who is on our side, who is more than just here with us, in the same place with us - like the strangers in the Mall who share a space in a crowd but have not connection to one another. No.

Our God is here as an active participant for the good. This is the God who has already decided how salvation will be achieved. This is the God who is willing even to take it all on himself and die for us. That's not the part of the story we want to focus on tonight, but we can't simply look in the manger and only see a Hummel figurine. This is the Lord of the universe, come that we might have life and have it abundantly. The God who is for us - - all the way.

And this is also the God who comes to us as one of us - born into this world, wrapped up in bands of cloth, just like every other baby born in Bethlehem. Born in a home, surrounded by a loving family. Jesus becomes one of our neighbors and our friends because in this mystery of the incarnation, of the eternal word of God becoming flesh, he takes on the limitations and the possibilities of all humanity and he meets us here.

These are mysterious things that we contemplate on a night such as this. That God should choose to become encapsulated in flesh and bone and be subject to all the vicissitudes of life is always hard to understand. There is mystery here that all the joyful songs of the season, all the beautiful decorations and glad greetings cannot push aside.

Why would God choose to meet us in this way? It certainly isn't the way I would have chosen to be God in the world. It would make so much more sense to come in with pistols blazing and wipe out all the bad guys and bring justice and peace to earth. It's supposed to be like the ending sequence to every great action movie.

But that isn't the way God chooses to become one of us. God in Christ doesn't take on our desire for power and prestige, or our desire to do justice by blowing people away. It is a different kind of power that is brought to light in Jesus. It is a different kind of humanity that he

models for us, a life lived in obedience and faith in God. It is a life that is rooted in the joy and the absolute assurance that God is with him and for him.

This is the gift we receive this night. The gift of joy in the knowledge that God is with us and that God is for us. But also, that God is one of us and calls us to meet him here.

It's a meeting that has the power to change lives and transform hearts. When we allow God's love to make its way into our hearts and lives, things happen. It is a joyous meeting.

There is a story about another kind of meeting that took place almost a century ago. You may recall the stories from World War I of the Christmas in the Trenches in 1914. (At least one song has been written about it). On that Christmas the soldiers of both armies were far from home and thinking of happier Christmases.

They had been taught that the enemy in front of them was a vicious killer and would do whatever it took to destroy them. But, as the mutual cries of "Merry Christmas!" drifted across "No Man's Land" along with the invitations to exchange food and treats, such prejudices and propaganda couldn't hold up.

From one side of the battlefield soldiers heard the sounds of a German Christmas carol. The English soldiers responded with "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen". It wasn't long before both sides were joining in the beloved "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht ... All is Calm, All is Bright".

Someone raised a sign for a cease fire and men from both sides came out into "No Man's Land". There are many variations on this story, but one thing that is common to most of them is that the first thing they did was bury their dead, often side by side.

There was also an impromptu soccer match played to the light of flares. Food was shared, stories told, pictures of loved ones shown. It was a Christmas celebration the likes of which they had never known.

But in a few days it would be back to the "trenches" ... literally.

This fraternizing with the enemy didn't please the Army Brass, needless to say. The fighting resolve of the soldiers was being undermined by the realization that they were not that different from the boys on the other side of "No Man's Land".

It was sort of like a variation on the famous words from the old "POGO" comic strip: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

The Christmas spirit had changed them. In fact, in order for the war to continue many of those front line soldiers had to be replaced by new recruits who had not experienced Christmas in the Trenches, because many of the veterans just didn't have the heart for the battle anymore.

Christmas had gotten under their skins and stuck with them - even on the other side of Christmas.

I wonder what it would take for Christmas to get under our skin and stick with us beyond this season...

Could it be that here, tonight, in this meeting ground we can once again reclaim our kinship with Jesus and our awe that God would choose to meet us here, to invite us to the table, to fill us with good things and to remind us that we are part of a fellowship of love that binds us to one another and to God... all because of this baby born in Bethlehem. Amen.

We sing the Carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and hear these words: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Our fears are met by God's promise of a new and living hope in Christ. He is the one who comes to us, heralded by the angels who tell us not to be afraid because the news they are sharing is good news of a great joy for all.

Our Messiah has come. Our deliverance is at hand. This doesn't mean that the things that cause us to be fearful have magically disappeared. Rather, it means that God have given us courage to live anyway, to live boldly and out in the open, trusting in God to make life worth living, even as fear tries its best to make us cower and allow the life to be sucked out of our spirits.

God in Christ has come as Love, the perfect love that casts out fear. Not that the world is perfect, but that through the love and the grace of God we can live fully and we can deal with life's imperfections as we strive to celebrate the good news that God has made God's home in the midst of us, meeting us right here and right now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.