



In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

I. Christmas Darkness

A. This is probably one of the most difficult Christmases we have had.

1. In some ways, it doesn't even feel like Christmas – there's no pageant – there's no late-night service with its special magic – we can't be together to sing those special carols, and go to Bethlehem in our minds and hearts to celebrate Our Lord's birth.

2. No, this Christmas is not like any other we've ever experienced.

3. So what are we to do?

4. Do we moan and kvetch about the circumstances we find ourselves in, or do we strive to make the best of where we find ourselves and seek to help others to do the same?

5. It's a very real question – with very real possibilities.

6. It would be so easy to give into the feelings all around us – feelings of pessimism and anxiety – I mean look around, there's a pandemic keeping us all "safer at home;" people are divided more than ever; there's hatred, and anger, and racism and fear – how easy to allow those feelings to overwhelm us and swallow us up.

7. Do we give in to the Christmas darkness of fear and distrust, of hatred and anger?

8. Or do we lean on our better Angels and strive to be a light in the darkness of these difficult days?

9. As I said, it's a very real question – with very real possibilities

B. So let me tell you of another person who had to make a similar decision in another time of darkness and despair.

1. It was Christmas 1861, as the Civil War raged on **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** was mired in his own personal grief of the death of his beloved wife, Fannie;

- against this backdrop of war and disease and pain, now he had received word that his oldest son, Charles, who served in the Union Army, had been shot in battle and was critically wounded.

2. And though his son would survive, Longfellow in his grief of this news on top of his anguish for his wife wrote these words:

*I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along th'unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*And in despair I bowed my head:
'There is no peace on earth,' I said
'For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.'*

3. Longfellow could have very easily given into the grief and suffering going on in his own heart and all around him.

4. He could have become an angry and embittered man,
- But instead, he wrote these words, for the last stanza:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men.'*

5. Somehow, he knew – this widowed father of 6 found a way in his heart of hearts not to give in to despair but instead latched on to hope – the hope ringing in those bells on Christmas morning.

6. What decision will we make?
- Will we let these times of disease and despair fill our hearts and rule our lives?
- Or will we seek another way?

7. Let me share another example.
- It's one of those "Author Unknown" stories you find floating around on Facebook and elsewhere this time of year; and it goes like this:

II. Christ Was Love

A. Last year, I vowed to make Christmas a calm and peaceful experience.

1. I cut back on nonessential obligations – extensive card writing, endless baking, decorating, and even overspending.

2. Yet, still, I found myself exhausted, unable to appreciate the precious family moments, and of course, the true meaning of Christmas.

3. My son, Nicholas, was in kindergarten. It was an exciting season for a six year old.

4. For weeks, he'd been memorizing songs for his school's "Winter Pageant."

5. I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd be working the night of the production.

6. Unwilling to miss his shining moment, I spoke with his teacher.

7. She assured me there'd be a dress rehearsal the morning of the presentation.

8. All parents unable to attend that evening were welcome to come then.

- Fortunately, Nicholas seemed happy with the compromise.

B. So, the morning of the dress rehearsal, I filed in ten minutes early, found a spot on the cafeteria floor and sat down.

1. Around the room, I saw several other parents quietly scampering to their seats.

2. As I waited, the students were led into the room.

3. Each class, accompanied by their teacher, sat cross-legged on the floor.

4. Then, each group, one by one, rose to perform their song.

5. Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as "Christmas", I didn't expect anything other than fun, commercial entertainment—songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer.

6. So, when my son's class rose to sing, "Christmas Love," I was slightly taken aback by its bold title.

7. Nicholas was aglow, as were all of his classmates, adorned in fuzzy mittens, red sweaters, and bright snowcaps upon their heads.

8. Those in the front row—center stage—held up large letters, one by one, to spell out the title of the song.

9. As the class would sing "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter C.

10. Then, "H is for Happy," and on and on, until each child holding up his portion had presented the complete message, "Christmas Love."

C. The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, we all noticed her; a small, quiet, girl in the front row holding the letter "M" upside down—totally unaware her letter "M" appeared as a "W".

1. The audience of 1st through 6th graders snickered at this little one's mistake.

2. But she had no idea they were laughing at her, so she stood tall, proudly holding her “W”.

3. Although many teachers tried to shush the children, the laughter continued until the last letter was raised, and we all saw it together.

4. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen.

5. In that instant, we understood the reason we were there; why we celebrated the holiday in the first place; why, even in the chaos, there was a purpose for our festivities.

6. For when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear: “CHRISTWAS LOVE”

7. And He still is.

III. Being God’s Gift



A. Christ was Love – that’s the true message of Christmas.

1. It was for the Angels and Shepherds – it was for Longfellow – and it is for you and me THIS night.

- Christ was love.

2 You see, in Jesus – God sent God’s very essence into OUR world, and that essence is LOVE.

3. LOVE is God’s gift to us – God’s gift at Christmas.

4. And LOVE is the gift that we are called to share.

B. Another one of those sayings that pop up on Facebook that caught my eye the other day was this:

“After the year we’ve had, your Christmas gifts are the people remaining in your life.”

1. Think about that: *“After the year we’ve had, your Christmas gifts are the people remaining in your life.”*

2. So then the reverse is true – that means YOU are a gift – God’s gift – and the gift you bring is LOVE – God’s love.

3. So YOU are the GIFT of God’s Love – to be share with all those you know.

4. That’s the secret of Christmas – that’s how we can beat back the despair trying so hard to take over our hearts.

5. Because Christ **WAS** Love – and that has made all the difference.

Let Us Pray

O God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN. (BCP p. 213)

