

24 December 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Christmas Eve, this year, is Lockdown Eve. We cannot gather in the sanctuary tonight and tomorrow, nor in the weeks to come. No one wants this. But no one has a choice. How like life.

### **A Covid Christmas**

Our instinct is to gather our scattered selves, to meet friends and family at hearth and altar, to affirm our love for each other, to sing 'Once in Royal David's City' and maybe 'Jingle Bells', and then to feast and worship in honour of the Christ Child, whose birth affirms God's love for us.

I've never not done this on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Many of you can say the same.

What then shall we do? We'll do what we *can* do. We'll rejoice and be glad. The Grinch thought he could steal Christmas from the villagers of Whoville. But he couldn't. Neither can Covid 19. "The Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day."

I've attached worship material for tonight, tomorrow, and also for the following Sunday. If you've never tried using these on your own or with others, or if you've just glanced through them as you would a magazine article in a dentist's waiting room, I encourage you to try using them worshipfully this time.

Say the words out loud. Take time with them. If it makes you feel embarrassed, so be it. If your inner atheist mocks you for it, let it. But understand this: if you persist, and before you know it, the embarrassment itself will suffer embarrassment, and unbelief will start to doubt its own doubts. In other words, Embarrassment will give up and Atheist will shut up for once, leaving you unselfconsciously in the presence of God.

What's more, like those exotic Magi and ruffian Shepherds, you'll have made the journey that Christmas asks us to take.

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a Shepherd, I would give a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.*

Now you're able to thank God unabashedly for the gift of life itself ("in him was life, and the life was the light of all people"), for all the blessings you have known ("from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace"), and for the love which comes to sharp focus in this Child's birth ("the Word became flesh and dwelt among us").

### **A Ghost of Christmas Past**

A lot of the Bible is poetry. The rest is poetic prose. Just by being what it is, poetry approximates the Mystery of the Incarnation. It dresses an 'idea' or a 'meaning' in beautiful words.

Without words, ideas are dormant and meanings silent. To make themselves known, they must descend from the cold realm of concepts and enter the warm world of words. They must be 'fleshed out'. This is what St John is getting at: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

One of the poems I always remember at Christmas I first heard read aloud. I think it was 1984. My Old Testament Professor at Knox College, Stanley Walters, read these lines at the end of one of his lectures. It was late in the afternoon, days before the Christmas break. Through the mullioned windows, I could see snow falling in the quad.

Stan Walters was an extraordinary lecturer, precise and proper in manner, and quietly witty. He once described King David's state of depression, after the death of Absalom, as a 'cerulean funk'. Sometimes, I'd put down my pen, forget about trying to take notes, and do my best to listen to his carefully prepared words with my whole self.

At Yale University, he'd been a student of Brevard Childs, a widely acclaimed figure in Biblical Studies. I briefly met Brevard Childs in Cambridge in 1987. I shyly introduced myself as a former student of Stan Walters. His expressionless face lit up. "Stan Walters was one of my best students. Young man, you were fortunate to have been taught by him!"

Indeed, I was. Stan Walters was unabashed about faith and had a razor-sharp mind. Some of the most intelligent people I have known have been openly Christian. He is one.

He was a hard marker and forbade 'extensions' on essays. A deadline was no shifting line in the sand for him. It was a Berlin Wall. Someone (not I, Gentle Reader) tried to submit an essay after its due date by slipping it under his study

door at 6 a.m. the following morning. Walters, an early-riser, slid it right back out.

The poem he read that day is by John Betjemen. Betjemen wasn't one of those difficult 'modern' poets. He was a beloved and popular one. This kept him out of the 'first division' of 20<sup>th</sup> century poets. He can sound mawkish, a bit too sentimental for my taste, and he pulls your heartstrings a little too obviously. But Christmas does that too, doesn't it? Here are the final stanzas:

*And is it true? And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,  
A Baby in an ox's stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a Child on earth for me?*

*And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissueed fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things,  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant,*

*No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine.*

I'll write again in the New Year. I will miss our gathering in the sanctuary. But next year, I feel sure, we will break Bread and drink Wine.

Yours in the faith,  
Andrew