

Year B, December 31, 2017
1 Christmas
Christ Church, Mexia

Lord of mercy and joy, you have given to us the blessing of your Son Jesus who has made known your presence, forgiveness and love to each one of us. Be with us this day and keep our hearts and minds open to receive your love and peace. Enable each of us to be people of joy and hope as we encounter others. Amen.

The Rev. Greg Asimakoupoulos, a prolific author, wrote about an incident that occurred on March 5, 1994: "...Deputy Sheriff Lloyd Prescott was teaching a class for police officers in the Salt Lake City Library. As he stepped into the hallway he noticed a gunman herding eighteen hostages into the next room. Dressed in street clothes, Prescott joined the group as the nineteenth hostage, followed them into the room, and shut the door. When the gunman announced the order in which hostages would be executed, Prescott identified himself as a cop. In the scuffle that followed, Prescott, in self-defense, fatally shot the armed man. The hostages were released unharmed."

That seems like an incredible thing to do and yet it reminded Greg that: "God dressed in street clothes and entered our world, joining those held hostage to sin. On the cross Jesus defeated Satan and set us free from the power of sin." It is a good way to reflect on the joy of the Incarnation, which is the reason for the Christmas season. And there is perhaps no way better than recalling the beginning verses of the gospel according to John.

First, John reminds us that although Jesus enters the world as an infant through human birth, he was not new. No Jesus had been with God since the beginning – he was God. But in a way his mission was not just to bring grace and truth to us; in part it was to give God experience at being human. So, it was important for Jesus to be born in the human way, to live as a human, to experience pain and joy, to better understand us in order to have an enhanced relationship with us. Yes, we are created by God, in God's image, but we are different – we are not God. Jesus, through his incarnational experience, provides the Trinity with the intimate knowledge of what it is like to be human.

David Bentley Hart wrote in his book, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, about

the scandal of Christianity's origins, the great offense this new faith gave the gods of antiquity ... a God who goes about in the dust of exodus for love of a race ... who apparels himself in common human nature, in the form of a servant; who brings good news to those who suffer and victory to those who are as nothing; who dies like a slave and outcast without resistance; who penetrates to the very depths of hell in pursuit of those he loves; and who persists even after death not as a hero lifted up to Olympian glories, but in the company of peasants, breaking bread with them and offering them the solace of his wounds.

What kind of love is this? Jesus didn't pretend to be human – he lived as one of us. And despite the weakness, the frailty, the mortality of humanity, Jesus was full of grace and truth. As John makes abundantly clear in this morning's gospel reading, "And the Word (Jesus) became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

Marcus Borg, in his book, *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most*, posits that to love God is to love like God. How can we love each other, unless we understand each other? We need to understand those who are different. And what better way than "to walk a mile in their shoes?" Isn't that what God did for us – among other things?

John provides a very different way of looking at the Christmas story. It doesn't involve virgin birth or many of the things that often perplex us, or especially others who may struggle with the mysteries of the Bible, or of faith. But both ways involve Emmanuel, God with us. We may not have seen God, but we have seen Jesus through scripture. And this is the news we need to share in 2018 – share with others the joy that comes from the recognition of who we are and whose we are. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.