

**JUST A LITTLE CRAZY!
CHRISTMAS DAY**

(12/25/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 2:1-20
John 1:1-14

“And they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us.’” (Matthew 1:23)

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14)

I don't know about the rest of you, but I am happy to be here in church on Christmas morning. As you know, I'm not one to judge or compare, but I confess to feeling more than a little superior to those who are sitting comfortably at home right now opening gifts and sipping eggnog before the Christmas tree. It's the same feeling I have at the 11:00 service on Easter Sunday after I participated in the Easter sunrise service: “I was there freezing by the side of the lake in Hopkinton as the sun came up this morning, and you weren't!” I'm not saying we are better Christians or more spiritual than those who are relaxing at home this morning, but I'm also not saying we aren't!

We here in New England, especially those of us in the Congregational tradition, know how deeply our heritage is tied to the Puritans. You may not know, however, that when the Puritans ruled New England, they prohibited the setting aside of any day for any celebration, secular or religious, including Christmas. The only special day of the week was to be Sunday. Just to make this perfectly clear, in 1652 they passed an act of Parliament to cancel Christmas. Everything on Christmas day was banned—from mince pies to church attendance.

As we know, the independence that so characterizes New Englanders is only matched by the independent and perhaps even contrarian polity of New England Congregational churches. Apparently at least one church in the mid 1600's decided to defy the ban and hold a worship service on Christmas day. As the parishioners were receiving communion, a party of musketeers broke into the church. They at least had the common decency to wait until the worship service was over; then they arrested the pastor and the worshippers. However, the authorities, the magistrates soon decided to release them because they were unsure of how to punish people for going to church!

I know there are United Church of Christ churches in our area that maintain that they stand in the true Puritan tradition, and that this is the reason why they are not meeting today on Christmas Day. They maintain that they are simply being true to their Congregational heritage. I suspect, however, that this explanation may be a thinly veiled rationalization for taking the day off, for staying at home and lounging around the Christmas tree. As I have often said, far be it

for me to stand in judgment of my brothers and sisters! However, since Christmas day falls on a Sunday this year, I think it sort of weakens their argument.

This past week I found myself thinking about Christmases past. I have special memories: Christmases when Darlene's mother and my parents were with us; when our children were not scattered all over the country; and the year we spent Christmas as a family in Uppsala, Sweden, when we watched the changing of the guard at the Royal Palace in Stockholm on Christmas day. I have a lot of good memories! This past week, however, I found myself thinking back to one Christmas in particular.

Four times a week I drive past Foxborough State Hospital on the way to my office. The hospital, which has been closed since 1975, has been transformed into luxury apartments and prime office space. It is quite different from the way it was when I left my ministry at Pilgrim Church to become the Protestant Chaplain to this hospital in the summer of 1972.

This past week I thought back to my first Christmas at Foxborough State Hospital. Since I had been at the hospital only six months, I was still sort of feeling my way around. Following the worship service on Christmas day, a small group of patients came up to me. They presented me with a Christmas card that they had drawn up themselves. They also had a small basket of gifts for me—some candy and a couple of cigarettes. I don't smoke, but the realization that one of them had probably shared his/her last cigarette with me touched me deeply.

Then one of them, a resident on one of the more disturbed wards, told me the patients on her ward were talking about me the other day. She said she was speaking on behalf of the patients on her ward when she informed me that of all the hospital staff--all the psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, the patients on her unit liked me the best.

As you know, I suffer from low self-esteem. So, I must admit her compliment was a welcome boost to my shaky ego. I immediately began to think of ways that I might share her compliment with my family, with certain colleagues, and perhaps even with a church some time in the distant future—which, come to think of it, I am doing right now! However, trying to sound very professional, I said, "Why thank you, Sally, that's very nice. But tell me--why do you like me better than all the others?"

She said, "Because you're more like one of us."

By now you're probably thinking that if that's the primary illustration for my Christmas sermon, the woman may have had a valid point! She most definitely should not have been committed to the disturbed ward!

This is a little beside the point, but I enjoyed the years I spent as a chaplain in a state mental hospital. I conducted training programs for clergy in pastoral care and counseling because I believed that the best place to prepare for parish ministry is in a psychiatric hospital. It was there that I learned that there is a fine line between madness and creativity. Those of us on the hospital staff knew this was true. When asked how one could tell the difference between the patients and the staff, we would respond that it was easy: the staff have keys. Notice that I still have the keys to all the buildings in the hospital, even those that are no longer in existence; they probably assure me that I am still on the sane side of the line. Or, when asked how one could tell the difference between the patients and the staff, we would respond that it was easy: the patients get better and leave. But I digress.

This past week I realized that the Advent season has once again passed too quickly in the busyness of my life and the difficult time through which we are passing as a nation and a world. It seems to me that from a religious point of view, it's much easier to come to terms with the meaning of Easter than it is to come to terms with the meaning of Christmas.

Easter brings a sense of triumph as we celebrate the Resurrection, as we witness to God's power over death and God's power to transform our death experiences into life. Easter resonates with the vibrations of death and rebirth that are part of the world about us in the season of spring and which are an integral part of our spiritual life and growth. Easter brings with it a sense of hope, new life, celebration, and the conviction that we all share in Christ's victory. But what is the meaning of Christmas? What does Christmas mean to us as individuals and as Christians?

It seems to me that the spirit of Christmas is not unrelated to that woman's remark. When I celebrate the incarnation of the eternal Christ, when I reflect on what it is that makes me want to seek the meaning of my existence in my relationship with the God who became flesh in Jesus, I do so in the context of a startling realization: that this God is more like one of us.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

Of course, and again not out of keeping with that woman's remark, a god would have to be a little crazy to want to be like one of us!

Christmas is the celebration of a mighty act of God. It is the celebration of the historical event of God become flesh, of God's choice to dwell among and within us. It is a sign that this great creative power that pervades the entire universe chose to become radically involved with this little planet, with this stumbling, struggling human race.

Christmas is a sign of God's tremendous personal investment in us, in humanity, in all sentient beings. It is an understanding of God far removed from Aristotle's notion of God as an unmoved mover, of Newton's and Kepler's notion of God as a giant watchmaker who creates this intricate mechanism of a universe, winds it up, and then stands back and watches it run down to eventual stillness. Our God, the Christian God, is a god who feels, who suffers, who cares, who loves--a God who is radically involved in our life both individually and collectively. Our God is a god who is just crazy enough to want to become like one of us!

From time to time, various religious organizations call for a moratorium on Christmas. The logic behind their plea is understandable. Christmas should be the celebration of a victory, the victory of God's plan for humanity, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. However, even a cursory glance at the world around us cannot fail to indicate that no such victory has in fact occurred.

Look around. The brutal war in Ukraine continues to wreak havoc on the Ukrainian citizens. One hundred million people died from war in the twentieth century alone. Despite a higher standard of living for many, the poor in general not only remain poor; they are becoming poorer. The prevalence of crime in our cities and in ghettos around the world is increasing. Overpopulation and starvation, its constant companion, loom as immense world problems. Out of our greed, we continue to destroy our environment. Far too many children will be going to bed cold and hungry tonight.

We human beings, arguably the apex of creation, continue to wreak havoc on each other as individuals and as groups. The physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of women and children that occurs through sex trafficking is deeply troubling. Opioids and other drugs are killing our sons and daughters and tearing apart our families. And fascism--not only in the neo-Nazi movement in Europe and in the right-wing element which has moved into the vacuum in Russia, but also in our own country, in the rise of antisemitism, in the paranoid responses to those who are different, in the callous suggestion of oppression and violence as a solution to the very complex problems of our society--fascism is alive and growing stronger every day.

A god would have to be a little crazy to want to identify with this human race, to want to be like one of us! With the mess we've made and are making of our lives and of the world God entrusted to us, it could be taken as a sign of serious mental illness to want to become a part of this human race.

“And they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us.’”

The startling message of Christmas is that God identifies with us! God made a powerful statement in the Incarnation. God continues to be involved in our lives and in our future as individuals and as a world--not in the way Aristotle, Newton, or Kepler envisioned, but as a God who is involved in a deep and personal way in our lives.

I would like to repeat something that I shared yesterday afternoon at our Christmas Eve service. The great Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Heschel, in a lecture he gave at Union Theological Seminary in New York City shortly after he escaped the Holocaust by coming to this country, said,

God does not stand outside the range of human suffering and sorrow. God is personally involved in, even stirred by the fate of humanity. God's participation in human history finds its deepest expression in the fact that God can actually suffer.

Heschel is telling us that God can suffer. This means that God has feelings, that God has feelings just as we do. This means that God is closer to us than we think. And this is the paradox of Christmas: that God chose to become human. That God accepts us where we are--and loves us as we are! That God finds us, is born in us, and never stops trying to become a central part of the unfolding of our life. That God chose to be born into our world, to become a part of our collective life, and help us unfold the history of our civilization in a more enlightened, more loving, more compassionate way.

The mystery of Christmas, of God Emmanuel, is evidence of the craziness of God! The whole thing was crazy! God chose to come into our world not as a king, but as a carpenter; not as a prince, but as a peasant; not as a sultan but as a servant. God chose to take up residence not in a palace, but in a stable. God came not in strength, but in weakness. Then again, our God has always been a little crazy!

If we are to experience the meaning and the spirit of Christmas, we need a sense of the absurd, the mystery, and the craziness that surrounded the original event. As I read the Christmas story, I can't help feeling that if God is crazy enough to try to pull off such a stunt, to want to become like one of us, then the least we can do is return the compliment. We can try to become more like God!

When we realize that the Incarnation was not only an historical event, but it is also an ongoing inner event, then despite the sad condition of the world, Christmas makes sense. If God thinks we human beings are important, it must be so. If God thinks you are important, it must be so. If this is true, then it makes sense for us to take our lives seriously. It makes sense to be happy to be alive and to have the sort of feelings we have at Christmas. It makes sense to be friendly, to reach out to other people through our Christmas cards and the lights in our windows.

It makes sense to give because other people are important, and because who we are and what we have is important enough to share.

I could never participate in a moratorium on Christmas, though I would like to tone down the commercial excesses. If God thinks enough of us to have faith in us and in our future, if God is crazy enough to want to be like one of us, then we should have faith in ourselves and have faith in God. Our faith is not the naive faith that the problems of our lives and the problems of the world will somehow miraculously disappear in the year to come. Our faith is the conviction that what we need and what the world needs now more than anything else is a sense of the reality and the importance of the Christmas message, the message of love, the message of the Christ candle, the message that God cares enough to want to be like one of us.

Can we have peace on earth? Can we find peace within ourselves? The lesson of history provides ample evidence that we cannot do this by ourselves. The lesson of our faith is that God is with us in our struggle.

I know it sounds a little crazy, but God is truly with us! God is with us in the most unlikely places and in the most unlikely events of our lives. Once we have seen God in a stable, sure proof of craziness, we can never be sure of God again. We can never be sure of where God will appear, to what lengths God will go, or to what depths God will descend to save people like you and me!

The absurdity of Christmas shows us there is no place or time so lowly, no situation in our life so dark, so desperate or full of pain, no troubles in our country or in the world so foreboding, but that the creative Spirit of God in all the fullness of hope, peace, love, and joy is there, too.

This Christmas may God be truly Emmanuel, God with us!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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