

“To Such a World as This”  
Christmas Day—2022

Long ago in another century, when I was a child—I was still in grade school—the strangest thing happened at Christmas. Christmas fell on a Sunday! Can you imagine that? I still remember the, well, the trepidation I felt as that childhood Christmas approached, talking with my parents about what would happen.

“You mean we’re *going to church on Christmas morning?*”

“You mean instead of staying in a house filled with presents, still in pajamas and warm robes, we’re going to get dressed and *go to church?*”

“You mean—let me get this straight so we’re all clear about it—we’re *going to church?*”

Yes, yes, and yes.

Days like this don’t come all that often. The last time Christmas fell on a Sunday was 6 years ago—back in 2016. Because of Leap Year we can go five, six, or even eleven years between Sunday Christmases. I checked my calendar—it won’t be until 2033 that Christmas again falls on a Sunday. So, enjoy this one!

I’m glad you came here to worship this morning.

We’re doing something that the calendar doesn’t let us do very often.

And we’re doing something very *Congregationalist*. Our Congregational ancestors ignored Christmas Day and both the pomp and the frivolity that they thought accompanied the day in England. You might say we Congregationalists started the original “War on Christmas.”

In colonial New England, all those Congregationalists worked on December 25. That little college in Cambridge, MA, held classes on Christmas Day.

But they *always* worshipped on Sunday—this weekly celebration of the resurrection.

Things change in 350 years. Last Sunday the *New York Times* had that wonderful headline: “O Come All Ye Faithful—Except When Christmas Falls on a Sunday.” All sorts of ministers offer all sorts of reasons to weasel out of Christmas morning Sunday worship—“I lead with love;” “You have to meet people where they are.” I read these and say with the President: “Come on, folks!”

I know. I’m not always “holly jolly.” And here we are—having left our homes, left our presents on Christmas morning—to be together here.

Which just might help us better understand this day.

In an important way, Christmas is about leaving:

Mary and Joseph leaving Nazareth to travel to Bethlehem.

And that wonderful African-American spiritual, “Rise Up Shepherd, and Follow,” tells one tending the sheep, “If you take good heed to the angel’s word, you’ll forget your flocks, forget your heards” adding, “Leave your sheep and leave your lambs, leave your ewes and leave your rams, rise up shepherd and follow.”

If we listen closely, it might be that this spiritual, like many others, is an invitation, a call to leave enslavement and escape to freedom. Certainly, we hear a call to leave where you are so that you might find deeper meaning, greater purpose for your life in Bethlehem.

By purpose or coincidence, that carol is found in our hymnal on the page opposite the carol, “See Amid the Winter’s Snow,” which asks of the shepherds: “Why have you now left your sheep on the lonely mountain steep?”

Those—what?—irresponsible, attentive, listening shepherds are our guides this morning. Like them we have left those places where we might be expected to be found this morning. Like them, we sense that new possibilities might be found in new, unexpected places.

Christmas morning calls us to Bethlehem and to this place.

And Christmas morning also calls us away from Bethlehem back into the world.

That we might go from Bethlehem into the world with hope and renewed strength, this morning we heard those words from John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word...And the Word—God in action, creating, revealing and redeeming—the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

There’s that wonderful story of the child who was awakened in the middle of the night by a violent thunderstorm. Frightened, she went and woke her parents. Through her tears she told them how scared she was. Her parents, in an attempt to reassure her, said, “Try not to be scared. Remember, God is with you.”

Speaking for most of us at some time in our lives, the little girl replied, “I know God is with me, but tonight I want someone with skin on.”

Skin we understand.

Flesh we can see and touch.

At Christmas we celebrate the good news beyond our deepest fears and wildest hopes: Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, God “with skin on.” This is God with a body, God with a face. This is a Creator who relates to us creatures as one of us.

And if God can embrace flawed human flesh, so too God will embrace flawed human lives. And that, of course, is good news. All the ways that we don’t measure up, all the ways that

we have failed, all the ways we have, well, *sinned*—God embraces them, embraces us with a forgiving love that calls us away from past regret into the future.

As Christians, we are those who affirm and follow the Word made flesh who is still at work in the world in our own bodies, which, when we come together as we have this morning, somehow can be thought of as the body of Christ.

And we begin to see once more that the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us loves not only human beings, but this earth, our home. We are still called to care for this earth, to tend it, to be *stewards* of the earth even as our very human actions imperil the well-being of life on this planet.

Let us then celebrate these days of Christmas with our own skin on. Let us begin with our own flesh and blood experiences, for we are probably closer than we realize to understanding what Christmas is all about.

Our bodies shivering in the cold.

All the searching and seeking that we have done.

Every card sent in an attempt to be in touch with other people.

The unchecked impulses to give, to be kind.

The rushing and running of all our days.

The more we leave where we are and are involved in the world,

the more we are living, physical bodies,

the more we can remember that it was *as a human being*—not as a spirit—that God chose to come to us.

God does not leave this world alone.

God does not leave you alone.

So let us go from this day remembering both incarnation and resurrection—the birth and new life that God makes possible.

Let us give thanks for what we *have* received—maybe even if it not *exactly* what we wanted. And in the face of what we didn't want, let us resolve to bring change into this world in these days that we have been given.