1st Sunday after Christmas  

A sermon preached at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH on Dec. 31, by Associate Rector, Richard C. Israel.

Merry Christmas on this 7th day of Christmas! I’m so glad you are here to continue the celebration of Christmas. Perhaps some of you are here today looking for Christmas joy and peace that seemed to pass you by. If so you may identify with the story of the little girl who was underfoot with her mother and father as they waited until the last minute to do their Christmas shopping. The parents were at each other’s throats, and at the throats of their children, too. And the children, excited about Christmas were trying to get into the packages and bags to see what was there. And the parents were trying to keep calm, but the kids were getting cranky and irritable. And suddenly everything blew up and the parents ordered everyone off to bed.

But then a few minutes later, the daughter came out and said, “Mom, Dad, I’d like to do what we do every night, I’d like to say a prayer before we go to bed.”

“All right”, they said, “we’ll have a prayer with you”. And they went in and gathered around her bed, ending their prayers as they always did with the Lord’s Prayer. But this particular night, as the little girl was praying the parents distinctly heard her say, “And Lord, forgive our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us!”

If you feel like one who has been “Christmased against”, it is good that you are here today. For us as Christians, the twelve days of Christmas have only just begun and while the world around us is preoccupied with returns and the pre-inventory sales we can still ponder the good news of the Incarnation. However, the gospel account that we just heard is not the story most associate with Christmas. There is no baby here, no manger, no angels anywhere, no star, no shepherds, no holy family. In their place we hear mysterious, poetic words whose meaning is anything but obvious. The writer of the Gospel of John says the Word was “in the beginning.” “The Word was with God.” “The Word was God.” “In him was life and the life was the light of all people.” And pay close attention to these words which are so familiar that we may miss their emphasis on the present tense, “The light shines in the darkness”.

This morning we are invited to reflect upon the preexistent Word of God, “Logos” to the Greeks. “Logos” might better be translated “the rational principle of the universe”, the warp and weft by which all things hang together. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson wrote in The Christian Century, “It ‘Logos’ is why things make sense—the reason cause follows effect—...the creative mind that accounts for why there is something rather than nothing. Because the Logos is, everything else is too.” To proclaim that the One who ordered the universe, who preceded history as we know it, entered history and took on our flesh and mortality is beyond our understanding.

It sometimes seems as if the darkness of what people do to each other and to ourselves, sooner or later, will put out the light. But John says of the light that is Christ,
“and the darkness has not overcome it.” God saw the darkness which we face in this world and God was not content to leave us in the dark. God became one with us that we might see his light, place our hope in his light and be bearers of Christ’s light to those who have all but surrendered to the dark. Irenaeus wrote, “The Word of God, Jesus Christ, on account of his great love for mankind, became what we are in order to make us what He is Himself.” The mystery we celebrate this Christmas is that God knows totally what it means to be us. God identifies completely with our life and journey of struggle. God “dwells with us”. The word “dwell in English is literally translated, “pitched his tent among us and promised to be with us forever.

Yet while darkness is fearful, it is also in the darkness that we will find God, offering us wholeness and peace that we crave, but fear will always elude us. Because human nature recoils from the light, doubting our worthiness to receive it, God meets us even when we try to flee. Why is it so hard to believe there is such a thing as a wonderful gift for us? Why is it so hard to believe love can be for us? That God wills to touch you and me and bless us and change us?

Annie Dillard wrote a short story entitled, “God in the Doorway”, in which she recalls a Christmas Eve when she was a child. Her mother answered a knock at the door and shouted excitedly, “Look who’s here! Look who’s here!” It was Santa Claus, whom Dillard notes, she never, ever, wanted to meet! Santa was looming in the doorway, looking for here. Her mother was thrilled but Dillard took one look and ran upstairs. She explains, “Like everyone in his right mind, I feared Santa Claus, thinking he was God. I knew right from wrong but had barely tested the possibility of shaping my own behavior, and then only from fear, and not from love. Santa Claus was an old man you never saw, but who nevertheless, saw you. He knew when you’d been bad or good. And I had been bad.”

Her mother called and pleaded. Her father encouraged. Her sister howled, but Annie would not come downstairs. As it turned out Santa was actually a neighbor, Miss White, whom Annie Dillard liked. She finally concludes, “That night I was the one who misunderstood everything and let everybody down. Miss White, God, I am sorry I ran from you. I am still running, running from that knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge. For you meant only love, and I felt only fear and pain.”

Hear the message of God’s love for you! Fear not! Don’t run away. For to you a Son is given, to you a Savior has come. He is Christ the Lord, the Messiah, the Light of the world. He has come to shine upon your darkness. He has come to lead you to life. Let him in, let him love you, let him shine in your heart, in your life.

And if we will but receive him, if we will let him into our hearts, then the most amazing thing will happen. We will discover that the light in turn will shine through us! That we will be given the opportunity to be light for others who still only know darkness, for you see, God desires that no one be lost to darkness, but that everyone, everyone find their way home.
Frederick Buechner wrote, “We labor to be born. All what little we have in us of Christ’s life, strains to be delivered from darkness into light. It is the secret inner battle of every one of us. And through our laboring, God also labors: to call us from the brokenness of daily routine beset with limited expectations and escalating fears to the wholeness of living by God’s promises. The light still shines in the darkness, giving power to us all to become children of God, and the darkness will never overcome it.”

The incarnation of our Lord—the divine Word made flesh—hallows our very humanity. Living by his grace, we learn that although we are mortal and sinful we, too, may bear the light of Christ in a world of darkness. It is for this purpose that we have been redeemed, to speak truth to the powers of darkness that would enslave men and women, trusting in Christ to light our way and bear us up when we fall. Let us live in the light of Christ’s love, and sing God’s praises with our lives.