

There is an old story about a wise and good king who ruled a long time ago in Persia. He loved his people and he wanted to know how they lived. He wanted to know about their hardships. Often, he dressed in the clothes of a working man or a beggar, and went to the homes of the poor. No one whom he visited thought that he was their ruler. One time he visited a very poor man who lived in a cellar. He ate the coarse food the poor man ate. He spoke cheerful, kind words to him. Then he left. Later he visited the poor man again and disclosed his identity by saying, "I am your king!" The king thought the man would surely ask for some gift or favor, but he didn't. Instead he said, "You left your palace and your glory to visit me in this dark, dreary place. You ate the course food I ate. You brought gladness to my heart! To others you have given your rich gifts. To me you have given yourself!"

*You left your palace and your glory to visit me in this dark dreary place.... To me you have given yourself.* On this night of nights, we come together to celebrate and reflect upon the One who has given Himself, God's very self, to us – the God who became flesh to dwell among us. We gather to reflect upon what Martin Luther called, "The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh." We come and

stand in awe of a great mystery that is beyond all human understanding – the mystery of God giving God’s very self to humanity by pitching a tent among us in the person of Jesus. We celebrate the God who comes to us, willing to dwell in the most despicable of places, the most vulnerable of people and the most wretched of circumstances to show us how deeply we are loved. We reflect upon the God who stands outside of time but enters into time, the God who is infinite but becomes finite, the God who is all powerful but becomes all-vulnerable. We reflect upon the God whose womb gave birth to the world but now is born of a woman’s womb to bear the good news of peace on earth and the good news of God’s grace and love. We reflect upon the living Word that spoke the universe into being but now cries from a baby’s lungs. We reflect upon the breath of God that swept across the dark waters of the deep separating the day from the night, but now blows while breathing softly on a teenage mother’s cheek. Tonight, we reflect upon and celebrate the gift of incarnation – the ultimate gift of love. On this night of nights, we reflect upon God coming among us and to us with skin on.

Quite frankly, this reflection is sometimes challenging because I have to wonder, how do we celebrate the good news of Jesus birth and presence among us at a time when the news we often hear is so inexorably

bad? How do we celebrate the light of Christ in the darkness? How do we celebrate Christmas at a time when it's hard to believe that God's core message of love and peace is anything more than pious babbling that will not reach or touch the powers that be?

The Rev. Craig Kocher tells a story about the way in which God's good news breaks into a very broken world. His is a true story about the way in which God became incarnate in time. He writes:

In December 1914, World War I was only four months old, but already it had become the dark and bloody mess it would remain for the next four years. On France's Western Front, soldiers of Kaiser Wilhelm II and George V faced off with one another from rows of frozen trenches. The cold winter rains had chilled them to the bone, and there was no relief from the endless layers of mud and constant sniper fire. On Christmas Eve 1914, Scottish troops looked out across No Man's Land and noticed lights in the German trenches. In the evening twilight, they made out the silhouettes of Christmas trees. Laughter drifted across the darkening sky. The lights of those Christmas trees burned brighter, and pretty soon the Scottish troops heard a rich baritone voice begin to sing "*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.*" *Silent Night, Holy Night.* Peering into the darkness of No Man's Land, the ground littered with German and Allied dead, seeing the lights of the Christmas trees, and hearing that lone voice, one Scotsman said, "It was strange, like being in another world, to which we had come through a nightmare, a world finer than the one left behind." That Christmas Eve in 1914, in the midst of all that power and warfare and among the sounds of a world bent on destroying itself, there appeared an unexpected gift, the gift of song, the gift of tenderness, the gift of **peace** on earth breaking forth in the dark chaos.

On Christmas Day, the Royal Flying Corp got into the Christmas spirit. A plane was sent up over the German lines and dropped a padded, brandy-steeped case of plum pudding behind the German trenches. The German troops seemed to appreciate this, so they

sent up their own plane with a careful airdrop of a bottle of rum. The Allied soldiers really appreciated that. After darkness settled across the lines that night, an ambitious Allied soldier took a tree topped by a Star of Bethlehem, leapt out of his own trench, oblivious to the bullet that whizzed by his head, and took that bright light across the death of No Man's Land, and sprang into the German trenches. The glow of its light fell everywhere, all the shooting stopped, and soldiers on both sides gathered to celebrate Christmas, singing *Silent Night*.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 spread up and down the Western Front, and for several days the fighting and killing stopped. Soldiers traded tobacco and photographs, a football game broke out between the Germans and the Allies. It's very difficult to kill someone you've played football with. So much interchange occurred across the lines that generals on both sides issued unequivocal directives forbidding the fraternization and the fragile but deeply needed peace came to an end.

As we gather here tonight, the ways of the world are turned upside down in the mire and sludge of hatred and sin. In places like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan we are seeing a world consumed in never ending violence and life-shattering warfare. And, with broken hearts we hear the pleading cries of the children of Aleppo. We daily hear the cries of those whose lives have been bruised and scarred, whose hopes have been broken and shattered. Yet, on this night, the soft cries of Mary's child are more powerful and more deafening than any of the gunfire and bombs that pellet this earth. Tonight, we are reminded that the greatest power on earth will not be displayed by weapons of war or by authoritarian power wielding rulers. The greatest power, the most powerful force that the world has ever

known, will be found in the vulnerability of a new born baby. Tonight, in that newborn child, we come face to face with the way God works in this world. That baby who is born on this night is truth and grace and forgiveness and light and love. That baby who is born into our lives tonight comes to overcome the darkness and senseless noise of war by bringing peace. That baby who is born into our lives tonight comes to speak words of hope and love. That baby who is born into our lives tonight comes to shatter all of the sin that seems to plague our world. That baby who is born into our lives tonight comes to turn **us** inside out so that, as we live into God's dream for this world, we too can put flesh on God's message of hope, of peace, of forgiveness, of grace and love. Yes, *the God of the cosmos who left his place in glory to visit us in this dark dreary place has come to give us God's very self.* The God who became enfleshed in Jesus the Christ is born again in **our** hearts, becoming enfleshed in us, as God makes us new. Rejoice! Our Lord, Immanuel, is here!