

Christmas Eve, 2018  
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Christ Church, Exeter

### **Christmas Joy and Heart Break**

The story of our parish began on Christmas Day in 1864, near the end of the Civil War, when three Phillips Exeter Academy students walked eight miles to Epping. I like to imagine that they were crunching through snow and fighting icy wind, but I'm not sure of those meteorological details. Here's how the story is recorded: "The Academy permitted one day's freedom at Christmastide. William Waters persuaded another student Frederic Thompson to walk with him to Epping to receive Holy Communion on Christmas Day. At this time there was a church (St. Phillip's) in that town, eight miles from Exeter. On the road Waters and Thompson came upon another student, Francis Rawle, who was undertaking the long, cold journey for the same purpose."

What we do know is this: those three men wanted to celebrate the birth of Christ that day by receiving the sacrament that Jesus began with his followers on the night before he died to tell them that he would be with them always. Take, eat and drink, do this in remembrance of me. Their eight-mile journey, there and back, on that day long ago began our story as a worshipping community.

I wonder what it says to us today that our gathered community has its roots on a long walk on a cold Christmas morning?

Christianity was once described by a renowned pastor from Sri Lanka as "one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread." (D.T. Niles). I suppose we are all beggars on this holy night: begging for some peace and holiness – begging for some tradition in a world where everything seems to change too quickly. Beggars looking for bread right here.

We make claims about who God is and what God does. We read, hear, and talk about the Christ child born on this night.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry became a Royal Wedding crasher of sorts this past year and reminded roughly billion-people watching that the way of Jesus and God is love. He did not preach doctrine or dogma, guilt, sin, or implore more church attendance, he said that if you want to know God, love.

The public part of Jesus' life only lasted some three years: we know very little about how he spent the other thirty. But we do know how his story began.

In Bethlehem. With his young mother and her new husband Joseph. Among extended family. Gathered, we're told, to follow the command to return to one's family town to be registered. Shepherds. Angels. The birth. The newborn baby wrapped tight and laid in a simple feeding trough for animals. The story is imprinted in our imaginations.

The church makes big claims at Christmas. We say that this Jesus, born in a small remote village two thousand years ago, is the way and the One whom God chose to come to us and make known what God is most like. The test and culmination of that outrageous claim is the One whose birth we celebrate. This Jesus is God in flesh and blood: walking and talking, loving and losing, living and dying, and being raised on the Third Day. God is with us. Not over, under, behind or before, certainly not against us -- but with us. And those directional details make all the difference.

We try hard at Christmas. Preachers try hard to say something that we might remember. Parents try hard. Children try hard to fall asleep on this night.

I have to admit that Christmas Eve in our house have not always been easy. Granted: I "kind of" work on Christmas Eve. And Christmas Day. It is good work, mind you, I'm not complaining... and I often think about those who work on this night. At gas stations. Outside in the cold fixing roads. Plowing snow. In hospitals. Waiting tables in restaurants and the dish washers in the kitchen out of view. Those working in our jails. Farmers who cannot leave their animals -- modern day living shepherds who still guard their flocks by night.

When my children were young, my wife and I went to great length to do it all. Sound familiar? Presents, Santa, open houses and parties, visits from family, and yes: church. Lots of church. I have memories of coming home late from church one Christmas Eve when it wasn't even Eve anymore and making sure everything was ready to go for the morning. The tree and stocking set up was just right. Kids asleep. Then collapsing into the bed until the alarm went off a few hours later. It was a joyful exhaustion.

We all probably wrestle living in between the ideal and the "should be" with the real and life as we know it.

And once we name this messy in-between, we learn yet again about the sweet spot of God's attention. This is the place and the time where God comes close. Somewhere between being afraid and feeling assured. Between giving up and giving in. Between

holding on and letting go. Between faith and doubt. Between mourning the loss of someone we loved, and embracing those who continue to fill our days.

A colleague of mine shared an experience of conversations he undertook going around his town in southern NH. His task was to walk around the neighborhood where his church was located and engage with the people who would meet. On first take, this to many of us would sound downright frightening. We are not prone to street corner evangelism let alone talking to people we do not know about matters of faith. Some people downright did not want to talk. Others did. He saw a woman who was working as a parking meter attendant in the middle of town. Checking meters. Writing tickets. He began to talk with her later and asked her two questions. The first: “what brings you joy?” She did not skip a beat when she answered: “the dogs.” The dogs in the neighborhood. “How so?” Because, she said, “the dogs see me as a person.” And then my colleague asked the next question he asked of everyone he met: “what breaks your heart?” The woman looked at him deeply and replied: “that most people don’t see me.”

May we see one another more than we often do. The message of Christmas is that God sees in each of us someone holy, worthy, and lovable – even when and if we do not return the favor to our fellow beggars for bread.

On your way home tonight, before you go to sleep, consider these two questions: what brings you joy? and what breaks your heart? God can be found both in the question and your answer. And how we answer will make all the difference in how we will carry the spirit of Christmas far into the New Year and beyond.

Let me close with one of my favorite prayers in our Prayer Book said at the end of a long day. Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love’s sake. Amen.