Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Christmas Eve 2017

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THE DIFFERENCE CHRISTMAS MAKES

It is truly wonderful to be gathered together here on this Christmas Eve. May God’s grace and peace be with us as once again we welcome the Christ Child into our midst.

The celebration of Christmas was not really established until the beginning of the 4th century. The church fathers, in their wisdom, chose December 25th as the date for the celebration, although we do not really know when or even where Jesus was born. The stories surrounding the birth of Jesus are mythic in nature, but they were created to convey a truth about God, namely that in the birth of this particular child, God chose to enter human life and history in a new way. God chose to come to us as one of us, as Emmanuel, God-with-us. Thanks be to God.

The choice of December 25th as the date of Christmas by the church fathers was intentional. In the old Roman calendar, the Julian calendar, December 25th was the date of the winter solstice. It was the shortest day and the longest night of the year. That Roman calendar was later found to be off the mark one day every 310 years, and so in the 16th century, Pope Gregory XIII established the Gregorian calendar. The winter solstice was moved to

December 21st, but by that time December 25th was firmly established as Christmas and so it was not changed to suit the new calendar.

Enough of that, pastor! Too much information, as they say! Yet, I for one like to think of Christmas as falling on the shortest day and the longest night of the year. It is highly symbolic. As for the shortest day of the year, this is what Saint Augustine wrote:

“Hence it is that he was born on the day which

is the shortest day in our earthly reckoning and

from which subsequent days begin to increase in

length. He, therefore, who bent low and lifted us

up chose the shortest day, yet the one whence

light begins to increase.”

Even more symbolic is the thought that Jesus was born at midnight on the longest night of the year. At the stroke of midnight, the birth of Jesus pierces the deep darkness and brings light and life to us all. Christians believe, in the words of the prophet Malachi, that he is “the sun of righteousness” and that “healing is in his wings.” (Malachi 4:2) And the writer of the Fourth Gospel names him “the light of the world.”

And so here we are, once again, gathered to welcome the Christ Child into our midst. But here’s the question that may be on our minds even as we enjoy the story, the music, and the carols, and even the symbolism of the celebration. What difference does Christmas really make? Can Christmas be anything more than our fond memories of Christmases past, or the re-hearing of a pleasing story, or the singing of familiar carols?

A poem written by Thomas Hardy comes to mind. It is called “The Oxen.”

*The Oxen*

*Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.*

*“Now they are all on their knees,”*

*An elder said as we sat in a flock*

*By the embers in hearthside ease.*

*We picture the meek mild creatures where*

*They dwelt in their strawy pen,*

*Nor did it occur to one of us there*

*To doubt we were kneeling then.*

*So fair a fancy few would weave*

*In these years! Yet, I feel,*

*If someone said on Christmas Eve,*

*“Come; see the oxen kneel*

*“In the lonely barton by yonder comb*

*Our childhood used to know”*

*I should go with him in the bloom,*

*Hoping it might be so.*

*—*Thomas Hardy

We hope it might be so, that this holy child was born with oxen and shepherds on their knees gathered around, but Christmas should not be an excuse for not facing reality. Truly, my friends, it is midnight upon the earth. It’s as though we have sunk just about as low as we can get. Injustice and warfare, poverty and hunger, homelessness and deprivation are the realities too many face in our world. As for us, the inner realities are ever present: fear and mistrust, cynicism and hopelessness, resentment and anger—all these define our inner world. Yes, it is midnight upon the earth.

And so we ask ourselves: what difference does Christmas make? Or, does Christmas make any difference at all? These are real questions, and they demand a response. These questions led Dom Helder Camera, the revolutionary Catholic priest who championed the poor and oppressed in his native country of Brazil, to write the following lines:

*In the middle of the night,*

*When stark night was darkest,*

*then You chose to come.*

*God’s resplendent first-born*

*sent to make us one.*

*The voice of doom protest:*

*“All these words about justice,*

*love and peace—*

*all these naïve words*

*will buckle beneath the weight of a reality*

*which is brutal and bitter, ever more bitter.”*

*It is true, Lord, it is midnight upon the earth,*

*Moonless night and starved of stars.*

*But can we forget that You,*

*the Son of God,*

*chose to be born precisely at midnight?*

*—Dom Helder Camera*

Yes, let us never forget that Christ was born at midnight. For us, this may not be factual truth but rather the truth that can shape our lives. For if God chooses to come to us as Emmanuel, God-With-Us and God-For-Us at the stroke of midnight, when “stark night was darkest,” who are we to give up on hope? Who are we to give up on peace and love and justice? Who are we to give up on faith in God’s leading? Who are we to throw in the towel, as they say? God, who did not give up on us, but who in compassion relinquished her power to come to us as a vulnerable baby born in a feeding trough for animals, surely means that we cannot give up on God, or one another, or the world, for that matter. Christmas surely means that we can move along in our world with faith and hope, and also grace and courage. This, my friends, is the difference Christmas makes. All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.