

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
CHRISTMAS EVE (ABC), 2009
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"The Spirit of Christmas"

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." [Luke 2:11 NRSV]

We are here tonight after weeks of hectic activity, tinsel and glamour, decorations during Advent, obnoxious elevator Christmas music, parties, programs and planning. But we have made the effort to be here, perhaps feeling totally exhausted, because these moments are special to us. This night is holy, and our gathering celebrates the sacred amid all the glitter. Here we lift up the eternal against that which is transitory. We celebrate our gathering this night in quiet moments. We revel in the retelling of the ancient story of that first Christmas night. We sing familiar carols and offer special music. This is an important part of our heritage of faith; it is a night full of God's love. It is a night of traditions with a message that is as new and fresh as tomorrow's sunrise.

Oh, oh, some of you may be thinking. We know this guy only too well. He is setting us up with a beautiful description of a special night. Now get ready for a real zinger! It'll be some moral mandate or a reminder of our mission! Surely he won't dip into politics?

But maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do. Maybe inside this old priest beats a heart that throbs just like yours when we hear those old, familiar words, "And in those days a decree went out..." Maybe what comes next will be just a simple consideration of some simple questions. What is it about this night that makes it so special? Why does the simple story of a baby in a manger speak to us so meaningfully of our God and of God's love for us?

One of the reasons tonight is so special is because it helps us to remember that a miracle happened. The miracle, of course, was the incarnation of God's love into a baby boy named Jesus. It has been hard for us humans through the centuries to understand and accept that miracle. And so, through the years, we have invented different ways to help us understand that miracle and its results.

Some of you will remember three Sundays ago when we celebrated the feast of St. Nicholas. We celebrated the story of how Nicholas, a bishop of the church, became known as a man who cared for the people in general, not just the faithful or those who showed up for church. He was and is known through out many cultures as a patron saint for the poor, the captive, and the young, especially orphans.

Generally speaking, his concern was for all those who could not protect themselves. His was a Christian love in action, to lift up the downtrodden and oppressed.

Here in America, where we have traditionally rejected religious saints and all things that smacked of Roman Catholicism, we have not venerated Nicholas and others like him. Instead we have created substitutes, like our clone of Nicholas whom we call "Santa Claus." We have even held on to the miraculous aspects of Nicholas, including the idea that he could cover a huge territory in just one night!

Through the years we have also attempted to rationalize our creation of this legend by saying that Santa Claus is OK because he represents the "Spirit of Giving." This is basically a good idea, except this "spirit of giving" carries with it an expectation of return. I'll give you a present this Christmas if you will give me one in return, at least by next year!

All of this is not to denigrate Santa Claus or the idea behind him. Instead it is an attempt to help us remember where the idea came from. Saint Nicholas, the original Santa Claus, cared for the very same people that Jesus commanded us to care for. He did his thing because he believed that God loved us so much that God incarnated that love in a human being. This was a gift that expected no return and thus was a pattern for all giving in the future.

Ah ha! Someone will be thinking. I knew he would get around to it! Next he is going to point out that this is part of our mission here at Christ Church, to give to the less fortunate with out expectation of return. Then he is going to say that all of this comes from that special night so long ago when God gave us Jesus, God's love incarnate.

Praise be to Santa Claus! You got the point! That means I don't have to belabor it! Instead I can simple say, "Keep up the good work, and remember where it all comes from." Caring and concern, the spirit of generosity, is what the coming of Jesus into this world is all about. It is what makes this night so special. It is the way of love for all eternity.

May you have a Blessed Christmas, full of love and giving!