

# Sermons at St. Paul's

*A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name*

**Christmas Eve, 2009 (8:30 p.m.)**  
**The Reverend Nancy Burton Dilliplane**

In the name of the Incarnate One, Emmanuel—God with us. Amen.

Is there anything better than a good story? I really do believe that the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke, told in the beloved words of the King James Bible, has to be one of the all time great stories. The story of Emmanuel. God with us.

But you know, it is Godly Play—our children's Sunday school curriculum—that has helped me to understand that *Emmanuel* is at the heart of all of our stories. God. With *us*. Because at the end of each of the great stories of our faith reside the questions: "Where are *you* in this story? What part of this story is about *you*?" In the silent wonder of those questions, each of us is invited to encounter God in our own lives.

The question "Where are *you* in God's story?" means that the story is never finished, it is only and always beginning. And the promise of Emmanuel, God with us, is that there is *always* a place for us in the story.

Fundamentally, the place where God's story and our story intersect is the place where Christ is born anew. The place of salvation. The place of light and life. The place of rejoicing and joy.

Our place in God's story is where, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, we who walk in darkness become bathed in light. The place where the yokes that weigh us down are lifted, the place where the hostile armies that lay siege to our souls are turned back.

The answer to the question: "Where are you in this story?" is what makes the familiar words of the Gospel of Luke, good news for *us*, even now, 2000 years after the events of which it tells took place.

So I invite you to wonder this night—where are you in the story? What part of this story is about you?

I remember vividly the Christmas that I found myself in the story alongside Mary. I was 8 months pregnant that year. God's coming among us as a human infant became, for me, not just a sweet story, but truly flesh and blood. With huge belly, swollen ankles and an aching back I lumbered towards Bethlehem with the mother Mary, caught up in the miraculous experience of being with child.

Now, clearly, my identification with Mary went only so far. After all, Mary gave birth to the Sovereign of the Universe, and I gave birth to Rachel, whose royalty is mainly in her own mind, and much disputed by her siblings. But for me that year, the incarnation became more than the stuff of creeds, it became the stuff of labor and delivery. God in the flesh. Christ's flesh, Mary's flesh, my own flesh. The Creator present in the viscera of Creation. The low lifted high. God with us.

But what's more, when I was pregnant alongside Mary, my story and God's story intersected in the holy business of parenting. And when I looked at my new daughter, I thought of Mary that first

Christmas holding the newborn Jesus, and I shared her awe at the privilege and responsibility of raising one who was created in the image of God. With Mary, I pondered in my heart the breathtaking possibility, the hope, the expectation that this new life would make the world a better place.

And I wondered then, as I wonder now, about Mary's role in shaping her divine child's life. I imagine that she continued to sing songs like the Magnificat in Jesus' ear as she tucked him in at night. I like to think it was Mary's prophetic vision of God's providence and justice that gave Jesus his own voice to proclaim the kingdom of God. I wonder. Did Jesus first learn to know and trust his Heavenly Father at the knee of his earthly mother?

I hear echoes of Mary's Magnificat on Jesus' lips when he preaches on the mountain, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the hungry, for they shall be filled." And Mary's "yes" to God—Behold I am the handmaiden of the Lord, let it be with me as you have said," becomes Jesus' "yes" in the garden—"Not what I will, but what you will." Oh yes, Jesus is every inch his mother's son.

And so, when I was pregnant alongside Mary, I found my place in God's story as a mother. I found purpose and meaning in the vocation of parenting. I found that I, too, had a role to play in speaking of God and God's reign to my own children, in saying yes to the vision of God's future promised at baptism. I became part of the ongoing story of Christmas every time I pointed my children towards a way of being in the world that sees Christ in every person, that respects the dignity of every human being, that calls for justice, peace and equity.

Is that your part in the Christmas story, too? Maybe this Christmas, Emmanuel comes to awaken or affirm in you your creative power to nurture and share God's reign with those for whom you care. If Mary's is the part of the story that is about you—it doesn't matter if you are a woman or a man—you are called to be a God-bearer, too. One who whispers God's kingdom into being in others.

Or, it may be that the place you find yourself in the story is alongside Joseph. Now, Joseph is pretty peripheral in Luke's version of the Christmas story. God gave Mary a voice, and God took away and restored Zechariah's voice, but Joseph? He seems to have had no voice at all. The Christmas story happens to Joseph without his "yes", nor does he have the power to say "no", or to control or even influence the world around him.

Perhaps Joseph felt like a pawn that first Christmas. The journey to Bethlehem was not his idea. He was at the mercy of politics and economics, made to travel for the purposes of registration and taxation. He was powerless to keep his pregnant young wife safe at home, and powerless to provide her adequate shelter and care when her labor began. It wasn't even his child. Were one to have asked Joseph that first Christmas Eve, surely he'd have spoken of a life so far off course as not even to be on the map.

Joseph, on the sidelines of a marriage not yet consummated, in a stable on the sidelines of a town that is on the sidelines of an empire. And yet, that night—this night—Joseph, too, is called by name. When the Son of God is born, and that stable becomes the very center of a world being made new, Joseph is there at the very heart of it. And it was Joseph who witnessed the birth, he who heard Jesus' first cry and he who stretched out his hands to receive and enfold the newborn king.

If Christmas this year finds you feeling powerless and without voice, at the mercy of plans and systems that strive to sideline you, while your own plans are forfeit—whether they are plans of fortune, vocation, relationships, health—then maybe Joseph is the part of the story that is about you. Joseph’s place in God’s story reminds us that it is to those without voice or power to whom God’s surprising, slippery, newborn presence is revealed first. Broken dreams, changed plans, interrupted lives, these form the stable where love chooses to be born. Hold out your hands, Joseph.

And then there are the shepherds. Shepherds held a peculiar place in Judean society. Shepherds were somewhat unsavory characters, suspect on many levels. They grazed their sheep on other people’s land. They left their wives and children unprotected at night while they worked. Both their work and the aura of suspicion that surrounded them kept them somewhat apart from their neighbors. I wonder if the shepherds in the Christmas story don’t create a place for those parts of our lives are suspect, those things that alienate us from God and from one another. Maybe the Shepherds are meant as the personification of those thoughts, words and deeds that lack savor—“those things that we have done, and those things that we have left undone.”

And yet, the shepherds, sitting on the nighttime hillside, separated from the rest of the Bethlehem community are the first ones to hear news of peace, reconciliation and God’s favor. The shepherds are the ones to whom the angels bring the glad tidings of great joy. The good news that is for *all* people comes first to those who are *alienated* people.

And so the Shepherds return to the town to see what this good news could possibly look like. And they see the One in whom God and sinners are reconciled. In a stable that night they find the possibility of relationships made whole, forgiveness asked, given and received.

And when the shepherds return to their fields, they are no longer alienated. They return reconciled, transformed, and full of praise for the One who sent this child to them in their unsavoriness.

And so, if you are in this story as a shepherd, kept apart on a dark hillside by those things that you have done, or those things that you have left undone, do not be afraid. If, like those shepherds you anticipate wolves, but not babies, know that the good news is particularly for you. Go to Bethlehem and know peace, see first hand the possibility of reconciliation and forgiveness that God sends as gift to those who are alienated. If you keep watch with the shepherds this night, know that you have been singled out for the good news of new birth. Good news. Great joy. There is hope and reconciliation for you—and for me—and for us together this night.

Of course, there is the possibility that you are the part of this story that hasn’t been told yet. Perhaps you are with the magi, following the star, but not yet arrived. The magi always come late. And I wonder, isn’t that often the way for those of us who have power, privilege, wealth and education? The good news comes later to those of us who are comfortable and self sufficient. We may need to be scattered in the pride of our hearts and sent away empty before we finally figure out that the good news of God-with-us is meant for *all* of us. What begins as good news for the poor and the outcast and the unsavory and the oppressed ultimately will be for salvation of all of humankind. And if there is not good news for the world’s poor and neglected, there is none for those of us who happen to have been born to privilege, either. If you are with the magi in tonight’s story, you may only yet glimpse the light of a new creation. Bethlehem awaits. We’re not there yet, but we’re on our way.

And in as much as salvation must be for everyone in order for it to be truly good news, there must be salvation for the created world in which we live, as well. Maybe you find yourself in the story alongside the thundering sea, joyful fields and shouting trees of Psalm 96. Maybe your heart has been in Copenhagen in the last week, at the summit on climate change, because you know that the Christmas story of Emmanuel, God with us, is meant to gladden the *earth* as well as humankind. Maybe your place in God's story is working for ecological justice and fulfilling of the prophecy that salvation is for *all creation*. It may be that the story of Christ's redeeming birth is only true if it also means the mending and redemption of physical world into which the baby was born. Maybe tonight's story calls forth your conviction, along with that of the seas and trees that *this world* is the arena of our hope and salvation.

Or are you by any chance one of the angels? What of them? The heralds, the messengers, the bearers of the good news. Maybe the part of God's story that is about you lies in your role as one who carries the news that God's newness, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and presence appears again and again in the most surprising of places. Perhaps this Christmas will find you retelling the story of God's healing reign in places even more surprising than Bethlehem or Chestnut Hill.

So on this night of nights, I ask you again, where are you in this story? What part of this story is about you? I invite your wonder. I invite your participation in God's ongoing story of salvation.

Whether you find yourself as part of the weary and waiting world, or whether you find that you yourself are a part of the hope for which the weary world waits, this story—the story of Emmanuel—is for you.

Wherever you find yourself in the story of Christmas, the miracle is that there IS a place that is just for you. We—each of us—are part of God's story. Emmanuel has come to us. God. With us. And there are none of us, and no place in heaven or on earth that is outside the bounds of God's newborn love.

Christ our savior is born. Amen.