

Second Sunday after Christmas January 3, 2021

Grace and peace to you from the One who has come:
The Christ-Child. God-With-Us, Emmanuel.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.
For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.
Joy to the world the Lord has come. Let earth receive her King.*

Familiar words at any and all Christmas services.

In Advent, we waited for the coming of the light;
On Christmas Eve, we celebrated the arrival of the light;
and today, on the Second Sunday after Christmas
and just three days away from Epiphany,
we take heart from and rejoice in the shining and the spread of the light.

And speaking of rejoicing, we have certainly done our share
in the last few weeks after first hearing the announcements
that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are here
and we'll all be able to get our shots
by the end of March or very soon thereafter.

And yet, oddly enough, in the midst of all the rejoicing over that news,
I've had a different set of words bouncing around in my head lately
and they go something like this:

The people who lived in darkness during COVID will have a vaccine!
And in cities all over the western world
and even in the village of Sechelt on the Sunshine Coast--
unto us is born a saviour—known as Pfizer or Moderna or Astrazeneca.

Joy to the world, the vaccine has come.
Let earth return to normal.

Now, while it sounds like I am making fun of this “saving event”,
I don't mean to diminish its importance to the world.
Effective vaccines are very, VERY good news indeed,
and certainly something for which to be thankful.

So, while you may not have had exactly the same words and sentiments
running through your head, I'll bet you've thought something like it,
or heard other people saying something like it—
because, if ever there was a year when it feels like
we have been living and walking in the darkness, it is surely this past year.

And in addition to that reality, where I live in the woods,
 it is nearly 9 a.m. before the sun is up high enough to glimpse. . .
 and it starts getting dark already by 4 p.m.--
 in addition to the longest nights of the year, it is COVID:
 A pandemic and all that that has meant to us and to all.

And now there is light coming.
 Vaccines have been approved and shipped;
 some shots have already been given and more jabs are on the way.
 And people of my age, and many of you and your ages, are a pretty high priority!
 Truly, Hark the herald angels sing and joy to the world.
 The vaccine has come!

And yet. . .and yet. . . even as we hear of increasing case numbers-
 and rising death numbers—statistics we could not have imagined
 in this country just a few short months ago;
 and even as new and stricter lockdowns are announced;
 and even we hear about doctors, nurses, hospitals and ICU units
 in many parts of the country being completely overwhelmed--

even yet, in spite of those oft-repeated dreadful bits of news,
 we happily and joyously see picture after picture on TV of people
 getting the first vaccinations:
 The very elderly; long-term care residents;
 front line medical workers; and, in the US,
 all of those in the Senate and the Congress getting theirs.
Sorry. No comment on that last one.

But, truly, the excitement is palpable. . . .as it should be. . .
 since having effective vaccines developed and produced
 in so brief a time is nothing short of a miracle.
 Alleluias are welcome all around, indeed.

But, once again, maybe because of my vocation or my New Year's Day grumpiness,
 I can't help wondering how many of us
 have ever been as excited about the birth of Christ?

Oh, I know we are excited about Christmas—
 the tree, the decorations, the presents, the food.
 And, of course, there are all those customary rituals,
 like going to church on Christmas Eve,
 or gathering with friends and family afterwards—
 all those things we didn't get to do this year.

And there are those traditions we repeat every year,
 like the fruitcake from granny's recipe
 or those special cookies that you've always baked.

But I wonder if we are as excited about the arrival and presence
 of the Christ-child coming into our lives as we are about the vaccine?
 I mean, over the last few days, I've not been able to help
 but see parallels between the birth of Christ
 and the birth of the COVID vaccines.

I know, this has been a tough and dark year. . .in so many ways.
 It has been a year that has ripped the band-aid off
 of some of society's problems in a way that hasn't happened before.

We've seen populations that are economically disadvantaged
 and disproportionately affected by this deadly virus.
 And we have made the connections
 between those sad realities and people of colour
 as well as those with physical or emotional disabilities.

We've also recognized the sorry truth that in the 20th year of the 21 century,
 we had. . .and still have far too many Indigenous communities in this country
 lacking proper housing, adequate medical care,
 clean water and affordable food security,
 which increases their higher risk of contracting the virus.

And we've heard leaders in our country, and others as well,
 debate out loud that the suffering and death of vulnerable people
 must be weighed against economic interests and failing businesses...
 and whether government subsidies
 reward bad behaviour or encourage "lazy" workers.

We've watched multi-millionaire athletes receive special privileges
 to play sports that feed the coffers of wealthy owners.
 We've listened to BIPOC populations in Canada
 tell their stories of mistreatment by officials and police
 as well as discrimination by 'friendly Canadians'--
 stories that belie the mythology of the Tim Horton's commercials
 we love to believe accurately reflect the nature of our country and its citizens.

And, of course, the Arctic continues melting;
 signs of climate change with hurricanes and floods are seen everywhere;
 wildfires are still consuming forests and jungles;

locusts are still devouring crops;
 famines and droughts are turning up in places where they weren't before;
 and civil strife is ever-present. . .while civility is ever-lacking.
 2020 was a long and dark and hard year for sure.

Now, it is true that for decades (and generations, in some cases),
 all of these and other sad stories have been the 'normal' for many in our society.
 And COVID has simply made us more aware of that fact.
 So forgive me for not being as excited as the media suggests we should be
 at the prospect of "going back" or finally being able to "get back"
 to normal. . .to **that** normal.

To be sure, it is a good thing that the vaccines will move us
 beyond the immediate crisis and the fear of death
 and allow us to think about just what our 'new normal'
 as a society should look like—things like:

How can there be better care for those in long-term care?
 How about raising the hourly wages for those
 working in 'essential' but very low paying jobs?
 Or what about those who have faced injustice and inequality
 because of the colour of their skin or the languages they speak
 or the head coverings they wear or the name of the God they worship?

In addition, while the vaccines will enable, or at least permit, us to reflect
 more deliberately on how we care for our very damaged environment--
 and whether jetting to Mexico for a beach vacation is a good idea
 because, after all, air-fares are so low and planes are so empty now--

maybe we could ask ourselves whether such travel dreams and plans
 we can finally indulge in or treat ourselves to
 just because we can or will be able to do so--
 maybe we can or will ask ourselves
 whether they really are the right or best way
 for us to live and act in terms of our relationship with creation?

Look, I'm not trying to minimize the importance of the vaccines
 for surely they are indeed a godsend—a godsend
 that provides us with the opportunity to think carefully
 about what kind of 'normal' we want to go back to.

**But, even more, the Christ-child is a literal “God-send”—
 an event that gives us the opportunity
 to think deeply and intentionally about what kind of ‘normal’
 we, as Christians, want to go back to. . .
 or should go back to. . .or can go back to. . .
 in terms of what we believe and how we behave:**

**Things like how and where and when we worship
 and whether it will happen as “church”
 in large numbers in a “church” building. . .
 or whether we will gather as “church”
 in small groups around tables in homes;**

**and what “being church” will look like in terms of money
 or costly buildings or paid clergy;
 and what it will mean to be “faithful disciples
 and followers of Jesus” in a new age and a new time.**

**All of these questions and more will be fodder for conversations
 and discussions about “what kind of normal” will we return to
 in the near and distant future because “we finally have the vaccine”.**

Look! We’ve had approved vaccines for a couple of weeks now
 and we’ve had that other “God-send”/”God-sent”, the Christ-child,
 for a couple of millenia now—and that event has changed
 and still changes things too. . .
 because his birth into our lives is not just for a couple of months
 or a couple of years, but for ever. Forever.

And he didn’t or doesn’t just show up like some sort of fairy-tale prince or wizard
 in a children's book who gives out rewards if we are good
 or metes out punishments if we aren’t.

He and his coming are very different—comforting, yes, but also difficult,
 for the Christ-Child comes into our lives with a call for us to die:
 For our ‘old selves’ . . .our old ways of thinking. . .
 our ‘old normal’ if you will. . .to be put to death. . .
 along with our desires to look after ourselves first,
 and put our own needs and wishes ahead of everybody else’s.

He asks us. . .no, calls us. . .to let that that self-centred part of ourselves
 be buried and then to be raised to a new life. . .a brand-new life. . .
 in which we seek to do the will of God by working for the well-being of others. . .
 in which our love for God is seen in our love for the neighbour.

Let's think of that as being the 'new normal'.

For what God does in the world, in THIS real world,
 is to send our neighbours--that is, all those with whom
 we share this community, this country and this world—

God sends those neighbours into our lives
 and expects us to listen to their stories
 of pain and heartache, of injustice and loneliness. . .
 and to weep with them, to pray for them, and to help them:

to help them find hope and freedom and a future. . .
 or to just find clothing and food and shelter. . .
 or find justice and fair treatment and access to COVID vaccinations
 regardless of who they are or where they live or whether they can pay.

During the remaining three days of Christmastide—
 known more commonly as the 12 Days of Christmas--
 as this strange and difficult year exits stage left and is now behind us,
 let us re-discover the presence and importance of hope and light—
 not only in the lengthening days and in much-needed vaccines
 but in the real God-send. . .the real gift of God. . .the Christchild. . .

who comes this day and every day to people like you and me
 to call us into the future to a new normal. . .a new life. . .
 to God's new way of living. . .God's way of living all year round--
 which is living for Christ. . .and in Christ. . .with Christ. . .
 and living as Christ in giving ourselves to and for others.

For unto us is born this day. . .and every day. . .a Saviour,
 who is Christ the Lord. . .and you. . .you shall be a sign of that.
 Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

Amen. SDG