

Year B Christmas Eve December 2011

In the Name of the Christ, whose birth we celebrate tonight. Amen.

Among many other things, Christmas is first and foremost a time of great interruption, perhaps more than any other time of the year. Some of us may have a holiday from the normal job schedule, but there are so many extra tasks to be done – special food preparation, decorating, cards to be written, gifts to be purchased and wrapped, special church services, and visits to family and friends.

People sometimes complain about all the work that comes with this particular Feast Day, and they might even say, “I can’t wait until things get back to normal.” That’s because Christmas is a time of great interruption, and I would like to say, properly so.

Christmas is the great interruption of God’s presence that we celebrate every year, letting it interrupt our lives, just for a time, with Christmas services and music and gatherings, so that we might remember the big Divine Interruption: Jesus. Lauren Winner, an Author and Duke Divinity School Professor, wrote these words: *“to live a life of faith, we must let God interrupt us.”*

Just as the Annunciation came to Mary as an interruption in a life that had been proceeding according to plan, so also the birth of Jesus must come as an interruption to our lives and to our plans. And of course, as Winner goes on to say: Mary's interruption, significantly, was a *child*—and *child*, of course, is synonymous with *interruption*.

We might think about the interruption of Christmas, of the Christ child’s birth, as being about three words beginning with the letter “C”.

- ❖ Challenge
- ❖ Comfort
- ❖ Commencement

First, the word: Challenge. Aside from all the frenzy of preparation, how also is Christmas a Challenge?

One answer may come from these words of Henri Nouwen, in last year's Advent reflections. *"We don't like to dwell on our losses, but our whole lives are filled with losses, endless losses. And every time there are losses there are choices to be made. You choose to live your losses as passages to anger, blame, hatred, depression and resentment or you choose to let these losses be passages to something new, something wider and deeper. The question is not how to avoid loss and make it not happen, but how to choose it as a passage, as an exodus to greater life and freedom."*

I would suggest that Jesus' birth, Christmas, is the challenge to live our whole life as a passage to "something new, something wider and deeper." Moreover, Jesus' birth, the coming of Christ into the world can be thought of as that *"something new"*, about which Nouwen writes; Jesus is the *"something wider and deeper"*. Christmas, then, is the challenge to us to move beyond our fear and cynicism and enter instead into a different reality, a reality of "God with us" – always, and under all circumstances. That is the promise of the birth of a Savior, which the shepherds heard from the angel in the cold and dark fields where they were watching their sheep. Christmas is, first and foremost, the challenge to live – to live in joy and freedom and creativity and courage.

That brings us to the word: Comfort. We think of "Home" as a word synonymous with "Comfort" – a place where we can rest, we can let our guard down, and where we can celebrate. Christmas celebrations usually involve decorating our homes, visiting our families, and sometimes that is very comforting.

Henri Nouwen also wrote these words: *"The place of our true belonging is not a place made by human hands. It is fashioned for us by God, who came pitch his tent among us, invite us to his place, and prepare a room for us in his own house."*

Our true home is found in God, and Jesus brings us to that home. Remember his words from John's Gospel (15:4,11) *"Abide in me as I abide in you... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."*

That is why the true meaning of Christmas is so comforting. The Christ is the one who provides us with courage, confidence, and compass for living our lives, and He is always the one who will bring us home to the our Father God in heaven. Christmas is the ultimate comfort for the human condition, because Christmas is precisely that invitation to come home to God.

Finally, we have the word: Commencement. Originally, I thought of Christmas as a completion of God's great desire to reach out to humankind, to incarnate as Jesus the man living among us, but then I realized that the completion is not until Good Friday and Easter. Christmas is only the commencement. It is the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem and ultimately, eternity.

When both of my sons were born, I remember weeping as I held them in my arms, because I realized that now that they were born, they also would die. Every birth is a reminder of our mortality and our poverty to do anything about it. Except – the birth of Jesus is more. Only the birth of Jesus holds the promise of overcoming death and the grave. It is the commencement of God's greatest act of salvation and love, and that is why we celebrate. Every child born is in some way a sign of that same hope that we celebrate at Christmas – the hope of God's kingdom come – the hope of God's rule breaking into our brokenness and restoring our joy, our peace, and our life.

My prayer on this great night of Christ's birth for you is this:

- ❖ that the great interruption of Christmas may challenge you – to become more forgiving, more compassionate, more joyful, more alive,

- ❖ that the great interruption of Christmas may also comfort you – bring direction to your life and the courage to live it,
- ❖ and finally, that the great interruption of Christmas will be a true commencement – a renewed beginning of hopefulness, healing, and a lifetime of true celebration.

In the Name of the Christ, whose birth we celebrate tonight. Amen.