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St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
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1st Sun. after Christmas

White Christmas

Let's count to five.

One. *In the Beginning was the Word.*

In the beginning was the "logos," in Greek, the root from which we get the English "logic." In the beginning was the reason $E=MC^2$, 2 and 2 makes 4, and water freezes at 32 degrees. In the beginning, it was right to love our neighbors as ourselves and wrong to murder. In the beginning, it was true (though not self-evident, I think) that all people are created equal, and endowed by our creator with unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. At least, I read that somewhere. In the beginning, it was more blessed to give than to receive. And, in the beginning, was the Word that a young woman would conceive, bear a son and call him Jesus, and we would call him Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, and Prince of Peace.

God knows what he is doing. The rhyme, reason and meaning of existence were all there, in the beginning.

Two. *And the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

With God/Was God: "with" (distinction)/ "was" (identity.) From such Biblical stuff the doctrine of the Trinity was made. (Just FYI.)

Now: the weather.

If Christianity were snow, we have seen some melting lately. On snow-cover maps, large areas that once were solid white—England, Europe, Canada, the United States—now show spotty or even almost solid brown. Even in our Bible Belt, the church's coverage is visibly receding; even in my family, where, mind you, I am a fourth generation priest.

On our Louisiana farm, we grow and sell pecans, with recipes. This year we changed the wording in promotions: out with the specific "Christmas," in with generic "Holiday." "Christmas" is presumptive, possibly offensive. "Holiday" is safe, polite. New language for the new map.

There are five holy days in Christmas season: the Feast of the Nativity, December 25; Days for St. Stephen and St. John are December 26 and 27. Jan. 1 is the Feast of the Holy Name. On December 28, we commemorate the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem,

the infants who, according to Scripture, were ordered massacred by Herod. Our prayer that day begins like this:

“We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ . . .”

The designs of cruel tyrants range down from the wicked kings of yesterday to today’s armed-to-the-teeth, demented school invaders, who also target children. They seem to enjoy the terrible power of the moment, and prospective infamy. Christmas knows and warns us about evil. “Holiday”—safe, polite—does not.

Christmas then presents us with a question. Which is more powerful: the deranged Connecticut killer, or Mary’s newborn child? The power of the killer is evident to everyone. Christmas invites belief in the immensely greater power of the child. This not self-evident belief falls like snow with hope and love, covering the violent, ugly places on the earth in beauty.

Three. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

All things wintry:

“He gives snow like wool; he scatters hoarfrost like ashes. He scatters his hail like breadcrumbs; who can stand against his cold?”

Any hands?

All things heavenly:

“He counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names.”

And all things biochemical.

Christmas Eve, there was a column in the *Democrat-Gazette* titled “Bring Some Light.” Jennifer Wheary was the author. Her topic was holiday depression. This was her advice: “Forget yourself and concentrate on helping others.” Do this, she said, because it works. According to the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, even thinking about being kind “causes us to release stress-reducing hormones, boosts our immune system and has a positive impact on areas of the brain tied to emotional processing.” Studies at MD Anderson Hospital show similar results, which doctors there call “helper’s high.”¹ Well, we have had it on good authority that ‘tis more blessed to give than to receive. But who might have guessed that being Christ-like is also clinically effective?

Karl Barth would call this a “secular parable of the gospel.” That is when ordinary people and things show the image of life’s extraordinary underlying meaning. In Connecticut, the self-sacrifice of protective, loving teachers shows the image of Christ’s passion. That parable is ubiquitous. Homes Rolston says that the secret of life is that it is a “passion play.”

Four. *What has come into being with him was life.*

“Life: an organismic state characterized by capacity for metabolism, growth, reaction to stimuli, and reproduction.”

Life! Rocks don’t have it—diverse though they are, and cool: Colorado mountains, limestone bluffs and caves in Arkansas, rubies on slippers, diamonds in ears, emeralds on fingers, and flat river stones that can skip across a pond. Water doesn’t have it, even for all its personalities: taking shape variously as steam, vapor, dew, frost, snow, sleet, freezing rain and hail—and that was just Tuesday afternoon in Arkansas.

Life! All that metabolizing, growing, reacting and reproducing keeps us in a state of flux. A rock can count on peace and quiet. Life is looking to its next meal; or trying to get some sleep; or wishing it could get a date; or worrying about its weight and receding hairline.

Our cyclical calendar provides us some semblance of stability—Christmas, springtime, summer, back to school. Repeat. The scenery is familiar, reassuring. But all the while we are moving down the road.

New Year’s Eve, Julie and I go dancing at the Arlington Hotel ballroom, music by the Stardust Band. Every year it looks and sounds the same: tuxes, evening dresses, in a whirl of foxtrots, waltzes, swings—once or twice a tango. That scene would have been the same half a century ago, but not the people. Year by year, the cast is changing. The elegant blonde with the long white gloves came just that once. Where is the dapper little man who will dance with any lady? He never missed! We see their image only in the rear view mirror, receding in the distance.

And look at you, St. Margaret’s. Some of the little ones I knew twenty years ago now are moms and dads. Their moms and dads from then are now beginning to think about retirement. Old ones have passed on to meet their maker, and some young ones too.

*I can still remember
Every song you played,
Long ago when we were younger,
And we rocked the night away.*

That is Emmylou Harris singing to Graham Parsons, her sweetheart who died, at the age of twenty-six, forty years ago, in a hotel room in California. It wasn't "Helper's High" that killed him. "The Road" is the title of the song.

*But still I think about you,
Wonder where you are,
Can you see me from some place
Up there among the stars?*

*Down here under heaven,
There never was a chart,
To guide our way across
This crooked highway of the heart.*

God love you Emmylou. It is true our hearts are crooked highways; it isn't true there never was a chart.

Five. *The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

I like to say it is as though Mark Twain had written himself into his own story, right there with Tom, Huck and Injun Joe. Of the Mark Twain character within the story, we could then say that he was with the author/was the author—"with" (distinction)/ "was" (identity) in the beginning.

Why would an author write himself into his own story? To be creative and advance the plot from the inside out, even as, from the beginning, he was creating from the outside in. That is Christmas.

And this is what occurs: a take and give. In Christ, God taking on our flux: metabolism, growth, reaction, change—the road. "The Humanity of God," Karl Barth called that. In Christ, God giving God's way, and truth, and life to us. "Divinization," St. Athanasius called that: "God becoming man, man becoming God." That is Christmas.

Light is what we see by. By early light on Wednesday morning, we saw snow covering our city as it had not on Christmas Day for eighty years. By Christmas light, our eyes open upon a sight even more lovely and enchanting: the reason, rhyme and meaning of our lives, to mark our way along the crooked highways of our hearts.

¹ Jennifer Wheary, "Bring Some Light," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, December 24, 2012, 4B.