

“The Three Accounts of the Birth of Jesus the Christ, The Savior of the World”  
The Rev. Gary Coffey, Grace Episcopal Church, Asheville, NC January 5, 2014

It’s good to be here. It’s good to see all of you, and it’s good to be seen again. As many of you know, I have been sick since before Christmas with what I lovingly call “the Christmas crud”. Anyway, I am much better, having missed the late Christmas Eve service, and the Lessons and Carols services on the following Sunday. But guess what? After all that missed time, it’s still Christmas!!! Of course, today is the very last day of Christmas, the 12<sup>th</sup> day, twelve drummers drumming, isn’t it? And tomorrow, Beloved, is the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, and we will have our regular 6pm service tomorrow evening if you able to join us.

I love the Church Year as it keeps us rooted in the Christian faith. It gives us 12 days to celebrate Christmas, the birth of Christ and the Incarnation of our Beloved God.

I read something interesting last week that The late Rev. Don Armentrout who taught Church History at our Episcopal seminary in Sewanee, Tennessee, used to teach his students about the three great streams of the Catholic faith—Roman, Orthodox and Anglican or Episcopal.

He taught that the “Church of Good Friday” is the Roman Catholic tradition, which emphasizes the suffering of Jesus Christ, particularly the Cross as the sacrificial way of self-expenditure that all Christians must follow, regardless of the burden.

This is expressed by virtue of having a crucifix over the altar and in other prominent positions in the church. It reminds us that the suffering of Christ—*for us and for our salvation*—is a constant challenge to the faithful to emulate the “way of the Cross” in their own lives.

Next Pastor Armentrout taught that the “Church of Easter” is the Eastern Orthodox tradition, in which Easter is much more than jelly beans and Easter egg

hunts and an hour at church before it ends. Rather it is the Paschal Feast Extraordinaire.

In the Orthodox churches Easter is celebrated for a week on end—not just a few hours—before moving on to the Great Fifty Days of the Easter Season. It is a joyous, momentous, let-the-hounds-loose occasion during which to embrace our ultimate hope—the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Celebration abounds!

Finally, Pastor Armentrout would teach the “Church of Christmas” is the Anglican or Episcopal Church. He asked the rhetorical question, “Who does Christmas” any better than Episcopalians?”

The understated quietude of Advent amid a feverish culture hell-bent on shopping; the tradition of “Lessons and Carols” rather than the singing of Jingle Bells; the elaborate decorating of the altar and the nave with greenery and poinsettias; the Christmas Pageant with angels and shepherds and the Holy family; the celebration of that beautiful late Christmas Eve service with music fit for the birth of our King; the quiet Christmas Day service and other traditions elevate the Feast of the Incarnation in the Anglican tradition in a way no other can match.

Indeed, we are a Christocentric community of faith, aren’t we? We try to keep Christ at the center of our worship and practice of the faith.

During the Twelve Days of Christmas each year, we normally hear three versions of the Christmas story. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we hear the version from Luke which contains the angelic announcement to the shepherds and the Christ child born in the stable. Reading now, from The Gospel According to Luke, chapter 2. In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who

was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

On the Sunday after Christmas, we hear the Cosmic Christmas story from John's Prologue to the Gospel of John. In some of the most beautiful and timeless words found in Holy Scripture, we have the Incarnation of Jesus connected with the Creation Story. We read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him; yet the world did not know Him. He came to what was His own and His own people did not accept Him. But to all who received Him, who believed in His Name, He gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of a father's only Son, full of grace and truth... From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made Him known."

That was the amazing Christmas Story according to John.

This is Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. Read Matthew 1:18-25.

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But

just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

Since the Gospel of Mark has no birth narrative, we have referenced all three this morning: Luke, the stable, angels and shepherds one. John: the cosmic one connecting the Word becoming flesh with Creation. Matthew: The angelic visitation to Joseph telling him to name the child Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

So, Beloved, on this Twelfth and final day of Christmas, where are you in your Christmas journey? Maybe you are still kneeling at the stable with the shepherds. Maybe, you are marveling over the Incarnation where the light came into the darkness and rejoicing in your heart that the darkness will never overcome it. Or maybe you are thinking of the angelic visitation to Joseph and Jesus as Emmanuel, God who is always with us.

I will leave you with your thoughts. But as I do, I would invite you to join me in singing these simple words of adoration from the chorus of "O Come All Ye Faithful", as we adore together our Beloved Lord.

Let's sing this simple chorus 3 times in adoration of the Savior. I would invite you to either stand or kneel as we adore Him in song together.

"O come let us adore Him. O come let us adore Him. O come let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord."