

Christmas Eve 2008  
Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity  
The Rt. Rev. Pierre W. Whalon

Memories of Christmas:

My earliest memory of Christmas is when I was three. My French grandparents were visiting and they had brought a toy cannon, a French 75mm, if that means anything to you. I was playing under the huge tree (we always had 12-foot-high trees) and Papé came down the stairs. I aimed the cannon at him (it shot a soft projectile), and he said, “*Si tu me tire dessus avec ton canon — pan-pan!* (If you shoot that cannon at me — spanking!) Of course, I shot it, and — *pan-pan!*”

Then when I was eight, I awoke to a most marvelous sight: a Lionel O-gauge train on an oval track, fixed to a sheet of plywood painted green. Oh, how marvelous it was, the red Diesel engine whose light glowed, the caboose lit from within, the logging car, and yes! a searchlight car, whose light actually worked. And my father told me that his workmen at the organ-building factory had made the trackboard—even today it feels wonderful. And I still have the locomotive...

And then there was the caroling. On the Sunday before Christmas, neighbors would gather at the local Episcopal church organist’s home, the same home where my parents had met, when my father was organist of that church. We would rehearse the familiar hymns we have just sung tonight and go out visiting the same round of homes every year. I remember the snow crunching under my boots—lots of snow in those days in Newport, Rhode Island— as we went from house to house, being feted with mulled wine, which I hated. Today of course I drink it happily at the Christmas markets in Germany, where they call it *Glühwein*.

And there are many not-so-good memories of Christmas. I don’t want to tell you those—I know you have collected some of your own, if you are an adult. But even the good memories remind me that many of those people in them are gone now.

So when I think about getting the house ready, buying presents, trying to write another highly original, brilliant Christmas sermon that will have you coming back begging for more... I feel like bagging the whole thing.

But I think maybe that’s the point. We need to tell this story again, not just for our children, but also for us who are old enough to remember.

We like to make this night bright, like the old Romans whose feast of *Sol Invictus*—the Unconquered Sun—we took over. But the story starts out with a girl who is pregnant when she’s not supposed to be. And her fiancé who decides *not* to have her stoned to death. And the government who forces this couple to travel long days just to take part in the census. In those days you went to the census taker, they didn’t come to you. And the birth in Bethlehem, with disreputable people showing up in the middle of the night blubbering about angels and other UFOs. The helpless child who narrowly escapes being killed along with the other hapless little boys in that town, O little town of Bethlehem.

Jesus of Nazareth wasn't born in Nazareth. He had to take a quick detour of several years to Egypt before he returned. And then in his adult ministry he was always traveling. The original third-culture kid, this Jesus.

For this story is about how God comes into our lives, to live it with us. Not a brilliant life, a glorious life. Just the usual—helpless as a baby before sin, evil and death. Just like you and me. But also, something else. In all the darkness of this story, there is a light that cannot be extinguished. When I was a boy all I saw in Christmas was this light. Now in my years (still young, still young), I can see all too well the darkness of my life. I believe it is only by going through its darkness—mine and Christmas'—that I can get to the light.

Emmanuel we call him—God with us. That means we are not abandoned in the darkness. We are not left helpless. Rather, the birth of Christ means that God wants to experience your life and mine from the inside out. And not just two thousand years ago, but in your life now. God in Christ was with you at your conception and birth. God has been with you every Christmas and every other day of your life. This is why we are not alone in the darkness. We are not hopeless in the face of the all-too-real evil of this world.

And finally, none of my Christmas homilies would be complete without mentioning Charles Dickens. Or rather one of his characters, Ebenezer Scrooge. The story Dickens called simply *A Christmas Carol* is merely an account of another chance. A second chance for a man whose only pleasure left in life was seeing if he could make others as miserable as himself. He of all people did not deserve another chance, and yet, he got one. Which Scrooge accepted.

For this is the message of Christmas: you and I will get another chance. Another chance to see the light. Another chance to hear God saying to you, I am with you, I was with you all those Christmases ago, I will always be with you. I am with you despite all your darkness, which I know better than you, who are so good at self-deception. See my light lighting the way ahead. It will never go out.

And one day, God promises you and me, all the darkness will be gone forever. And we will be with Jesus. Like Jesus.

So, one more time, with feeling: Merry Christmas!