

# Holy Night

10 December 2006

Bible passage: **John 1:1, 14a (TEV)**

“In the beginning, the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the word was God... The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us.”

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## Part 1

The story is told about a Sunday School class in England a number of years ago. The teacher was helping her class build a manger scene in the corner of their classroom. It had everything it needed: the wise men, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, the sheep and some cows. The children seemed fascinated with the whole thing, and one child seemed especially enthralled, and maybe even a little puzzled. Finally the teacher asked him, “What is it? Why are you so taken with the manger scene? Is there something bothering you?” The little guy answered, “What I’d like to know is where God fits in.”

That may be something we all want to know. Where does God fit into this time of year? We may have a nativity scene in our homes, and we may come to church and talk about it, but does God really play a part in our Christmas celebration? And what does God have to do with it, anyway?

I think a part of the struggle some of us have is that Christmas has become so encumbered with layer upon layer of complex meanings. We pile on things like family time, the traditions that we carry around with us, certain expectations of what it’s all going to be like, the myths we try to sustain, and much, much more.

William Sloane Coffin, the esteemed long-time pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, now retired, has written a book entitled *Letters to a Young Doubter*. In that book, he discusses a basic problem that he thinks exists with Christmas, and when I read it, I had to concur. He writes, “**What’s dangerous is not a commercialized but a sentimentalized Christmas.**” When asked to explain what he meant by that, he noted that those who engage in commercializing the holiday don’t ever pretend to be doing anything else. And then he said, “**Sentimentality, however, does not arise from the truth; it’s what’s poured on top, blurring and distorting the truth.**”

What I think he means is that you and I have put many beautified stories about the wonderful event that occurred thousands of years ago, and we miss the point—both then and now—that God is at the heart of Christmas, from beginning to end.

That’s what our Bible passage wants us to understand. It is the beginning portion of John’s gospel, a gospel that does not tell the story about the birth of Jesus at all. Instead, it starts with words that may sound strangely familiar: “**In the beginning...**” Those words take us back,

hopefully, to the first creation story where we heard them initially...“**In the beginning God.**”

Our verses from *Today’s English Version* put it like this: “**In the beginning, the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us.**” Not only do we have words that echo the start of creation, but we also have “the Word,” which conjures up images of speech, and in the first creation story, we have “God said...” and when God breathed a word of something, that something came into being. We read, “**The Word was God,**” and “**The Word became a human being a lived among us.**”

Christmas is the ultimate expression that God is with us, that God knows and understands us, because God, in some mysterious way took on human form and lived life as we live life. What I think that means is that the very nature of God, who God is and what God is like, is revealed to us in the life of the man Jesus. We can see what God is like by looking at how Jesus lived his life, and how he loved and welcomed everyone.

## VIDEO:

### Part 2

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Leaving Church*, describes how she sees Jesus. She says that Jesus shows us a new way to be human, and gives us the courage to live in a deep relationship with the holy. That’s what Christmas calls forth from us, too, the possibility of living and growing in relationship with God and with one another. It’s trying to live life looking outward with eyes of compassion and love.

To experience a true “holy night,” we have to be open to being human, and to seeing the little ways in which God is present. Let me give you what you may consider a rather silly example. The day I was putting this message together was a day when I felt rather stuck. I knew what it was to be about; I had done my research and stopped to pray, but I was still stuck—not really knowing where to begin or how to move forward.

I was sitting in my office, staring at my Bible, when our new kitten, who had been with us about four weeks at the time, jumped up on my lap. He’s not done a whole lot of that in the time he’s been here, so I petted him for a minute, and he purred a deep, contented purr. Then he climbed up, nestled his head on my shoulder, and proceeded to go to sleep.

It was a bit of a precious moment, and I thought it would last only a few minutes, so I sat quietly, just listening to him breathe, and petting him. That one moment stretched into 15, and still he slept, and I realized that I was more relaxed than I had been before he hopped up there, so I let myself continue to sit quietly. And then a thought came

into my mind, a thought that said, "This is a holy moment." Even though it was daytime, it qualified to me as a "holy night." I experienced God in that moment, and I don't often sit quietly enough to allow that to happen, so it was a wonderful gift.

However, that isn't the only way we can experience holy moments during this season. When we're looking toward others with eyes of love and compassion, we are experiencing the holy. I, along with some of you, had the opportunity to hear Anne Lamott speak during a Spirit and Place event a couple of weeks ago. She began her talk while sharing a bit about a Sunday School class she teaches at her church in California. She said that she'll begin a class by saying something along the lines of, "I see someone here who has a lavender sweater on, and a ribbon in her hair. I want her to know that she is special; she is loved and chosen. She can come sit by me." And of course, there's a little girl in the class wearing a lavender sweater with a ribbon in her hair, who can't quite believe the mystery, that she is loved and chosen, but she goes to sit with the teacher. Eventually the whole class is there, and they get there knowing that they are "loved and chosen."

How can we, during this season, help others know that they, too are loved and chosen? One way is by reaching out to those who are lonely, or who feel lost. We can see them, really see them, as human beings like us, and by our words and deeds, can help them know that they are loved and chosen. We can reach those who are struggling with addiction and brokenness, by treating them with love, by letting them know they are loved and chosen. We can help the elderly, those who are ill, those who are afraid, by looking through our human eyes of care and compassion, and reaching out. When we live like that, we will know what it is to have a "holy night," and many holy moments.

It's like a story one of you sent me about a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was going to be a long trip to where God was, so he packed his bag with Twinkies and a six-pack of Root Beer, and he started off. When he had gone about three blocks, he met an elderly man. The man was sitting in the park just feeding some pigeons. The boy sat down next to him, and opened his bag. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the man looked hungry, so he offered him a Twinkie. The man gratefully accepted it, and smiled at the boy.

His smile was so pleasant that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered him a root beer. Again the man smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word. As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the man, and gave him a hug. The man gave him his biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." And before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? God's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the elderly man, also radiant with joy, returned to his home. His son was stunned by the look of peace on his face and he asked, "Dad, what did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." However, before his son could respond, he added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

Holy moments—both man and boy experienced some holy moments in which both felt loved and chosen. Now, that's a real "Holy Night."

### **Closing:**

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we know, no matter where we've been, what we're wearing, who we are, how lost we feel, that each and every one of us is "loved and chosen." That's true holiness.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.