

Christmas Day 2014 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland.
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This service is my favorite Christmas service. All of them are good, of course, but this one seems to get closer to both the experience of the First Christmas and also that it's daytime outside – that there's light that's not artificial.

I've often wondered what it must be like to grow up in the Southern Hemisphere, where Christmas is 'mid-summer' – I have friends in Australia who celebrate with a "barbi" (as in "barbeque") wearing shorts on the beach!

When I asked one of them what grounded their Christmas celebration, he said "the creche." Now I don't know about you but I have several creches. There's the traditional one – plaster figurines of Joseph, Mary and Jesus, various animals, and 3 wise men (apparently the manufacturers hadn't read the gospels - no number is ever attributed to the humans, only the gifts; there could have been 20!).

I also have a creche where all the figures are bears, another where they're cats, a Mexican creche, and so on. I'm aware as I say this that some of those creches lean toward trivializing the event we as Christians see as absolutely central to our faith, but my fascination with how human beings try and process challenging narratives has overwhelmed my sense that such creches don't quite fit with the original story!

Perhaps the most challenging creche I have is one that came from Bethlehem.

Bethlehem today is – mostly – an example of remarkable interfaith cooperation. I say "mostly" because there are no Jews in Bethlehem – it's a Christian/Muslim community – half of Bethlehem is Christian, half Muslim. Christians and Muslims share in political governance. It's very impressive. Bethlehem's also the largest center for Christians in the Holy Land where overall Christians make up only 1% of the population.

Bethlehem's also separated from Jerusalem – only six miles away – and the rest of the West Bank by the Separation Wall – a 29' high concrete wall that completely encircles the city. There's deep irony to the fact that the city of birth of the Prince of Peace – the city more than any other in the world that stands for peace – is subject to a Domination System's application of military force and control.

That brings me back to the creche I got in Bethlehem. It's beautifully made of olive wood. On one side is a traditional view of where Jesus was born - a barn. On the other, all the animals, and the wise men from the east.

The two sides are separated by a wall. There, in a wonderful/horrible physical metaphor is the story of humanity's relationship with God.

It's very easy to trivialize Christmas. In fact for many people it's *essential* to trivialize Christmas.

The reality of the first Christmas was nothing like our idealized, romanticized version. It was cold and damp. In all likelihood what we have come to think of as a barn was actually a cave. It would have been a typically dangerous birth for a Jewish peasant.

But more importantly, if we manage to idealize, romanticize and, finally, trivialize the Christmas story we rob it of its very profound power.

This event is the central theological proof that our Creator's care for us extends to a willingness to be self-limiting; to share in the many and profound struggles that we human beings experience, to know the meaning of suffering, and pain, and death – ultimately to stand beside us and say that our lives and God's life are inexorably intertwined, and that while our human nature can drag us down into the sticky muck of human existence, God's nature - now co-terminal with our own – can pull us up to amazing heights.

Today we celebrate God-with-us. But perhaps more significantly – and more importantly – we also celebrate us-with-God, with all the implications that carries.

Thus, this day's challenge is not so much in seeing the Christmas story from a passive perspective – on what God does for us (though it certainly is that); rather this day's challenge is in forcing us to consider what it means for us when we recognize that we are now with God – our lives and God's life are co-terminal.

How different the world would be if we could get our minds and our hearts around that quite stunning reality!

So as you leave here today, ask yourselves that question: “how should my life be different, as a result of this co-incidence of the human and the divine?” Not “how could?” but “how should?”

If you can ask yourself that question – and answer it honestly – then you've grasped some of the meaning of the even we're celebrating this morning.

“In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on.”

— Robert Frost