

Christmas Eve, 2012. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA Nigel Taber-Hamilton.

Welcome, again, to this common celebration of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, somewhere in the Land we call Holy, nearly 2,000 years ago.

And it is a celebration; there's something about the birth of a child – any child – that provokes within us a sense that dancing is a good option! Perhaps it's because the journey to that undiscovered country of every child's future still lies ahead of this new child, unsullied AND unwounded by the disappointments and struggles that make up parts of our lives. Everything is pure and holy at this moment – angels can sing and shepherds stand in silent awe: we have a blank slate on which to write any story we wish about the future.

I believe that's why it's to this celebration that we so often turn to get away from the cares and concerns of our daily world – to step into a moment insulated from the harsh realities of the everyday, looking for strength to continue and the promise of something better, more wholesome, than the disappointing ordinariness or sometimes numbing pain that can fill so much of our lives.

Can we do that today? It seems as if the last few weeks have been filled with anything but holiday cheer. Can we get away from the horrific events at Sandy Hook Elementary School, only 11 days ago, the consequences of which hang in the air like acrid smoke – especially on this day when we celebrate the birth of a child – casting a shadowy pall over what we always expect be a time of unqualified celebration? Can we?

There's an obvious answer: yes! But it's spoken more out of hope than conviction, setting aside the potential for guilt if we're successful because it could feel as if we've turned our backs on those horrific events, that we're just being selfish. How then, should we respond?

First, we need to “get real” about the contents of the story we're celebrating today. We dress up the Christmas story with all sorts of mind-games, but ultimately the birth of a child on a cold winter day in a barn surely doesn't rank up there with the finest birthing place I can think of! And the rest of the story for Mary the new parent, of Nazareth in Galilee, is not, for Mary and her newborn, one filled with promise. In fact in the end it's little different than that of any Sandy Hook mother, with the exception that the bloody and violent cutting short of Jesus' life came at a later age – not 6 but about 30.

That means that we Christians will always celebrate this day with one ear listening for the cock's crow, and the driven nails of crucifixion; there is always a reflective qualification to this day: no “happy-clappy” celebration free of the cross's long shadow.

So is it possible to celebrate on this day in spite of the events in Jerusalem around 30 A.D., or in Sandy Hook just over a week ago?

Yes it is. But not “in spite of”, but “because of”. Because of the consequences. Both events have ‘birthed’ something quite remarkable, a community has formed around the grieving parents and townsfolk, and within our nation – even around the world – that speaks to the highest qualities of

the human spirit; an outpouring of compassion and empathy, and a burning desire to prevent its recurrence; to bring justice.

Yet we still struggle - how could God let these tragedies happen? What God would we rather have? The one who controls absolutely everything about our lives, taking away our free-will and treating us as nothing short of infants who don't know any better? Because that's the sort of God who would always fix things. I know that there are times when I would rather have a God that just fixes things, now. But on reflection that's a world where we're really nothing more than puppets, and the Divine Puppet-master pulls all the strings.

God is a God who has given us freedom to choose. Much of the pain of living is as a result of this gift of freedom – free will – free agency, where we make our own choices and have to live with the consequences. a freedom that some of us exercise – sadly and tragically – to harm and destroy life. Our faith consistently tells us that in those times – when we or others have chosen badly and acted on those bad choices, and we or others have suffered or even died as a result – God weeps with us. God experiences the depth of grief that we feel. And God comforts us.

No, God's presence with us doesn't mean that we will not suffer. But It means that we will never suffer alone.

This evening/day is making real in time and space God's presence with us, this season of Immanuel (which means "God-with-us"). This birth says loudly and unequivocally that no matter how bad things get (and we've seen that they can get very bad), God is with us. This is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

I believe that this alone is a good enough reason for joy. And I believe we are called to bear witness to this joy in our grieving world.

But there's another part to this day's story, another result of this gift of freedom; another meaning of this birth that we celebrate this day: that it also births and echoes much of the joy we experience in our world, our living and in each other. Family, community, relationships, love, joy, peace – they're all referenced, echoed, and remembered in this birth.

And it begins a story that is, too, a reminder of all of our lives and our life: that it is fleeting, unpredictable and oh-so-fragile, and thus infinitely precious. Remembering that, and living from within it's sharp insight is what puts joy and meaning into all that we have and do; that's why our living, by it's very nature, constantly reminds us that it is to be protected and treasured and celebrated.

This, then, is the deeper meaning of Christmas: that God empties himself and enters into human form, suffering with us in our freedom: our freedom to protect and nurture and celebrate life, and our freedom – sadly and tragically – to harm and destroy life.

I said earlier that we Christians will always celebrate this day with one ear listening for the

cock's crow, and the driven nails of crucifixion, but that's really only part of the story. For we listen, too for Mary – the other Mary – and her cry as the dawn breaks that the tomb is empty, and death is defeated, and joy has re-entered the world. Yes, we can celebrate this day, and do so with joy, knowing about the tragedies of our world and, because of moments like this , being able to return to them with compassion and commitment, in the sure and certain hope that there is nothing, ultimately that can separate us from God's love, and God's joy, and God's peace.

This is a new beginning - even the cross and the death and destruction it represents is not the end – the story is not over, and unlike so many it DOES end well!

May that be your gift, this Christmas.

AMEN.