



CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF LONG ISLAND



Christmas Eve: December 24, 2020

*Here on the Ground*

The Very Rev. Dr. Michael Sniffen, Dean of the Cathedral

I was driving to the grocery store for half and half the other day when I realized I didn't have my mask. I muttered to myself and made a frustrated U-turn at the end of 5<sup>th</sup> street. Pulling back into the Deanery driveway, I felt suddenly ashamed. Here I was annoyed by a minor inconvenience while so many neighbors, friends and strangers continue to risk their lives for the sake of humanity.

I ran inside, grabbed one of a half-dozen masks hanging on the key hooks in our kitchen, got back in the car, took a breath and said to myself, "let's try this again, shall we."

This is not the Christmas we hoped for, but it's the Christmas we've got. I've had my temperature checked twice today. I've been registered more times than a shared Netflix account and that's nothing compared to the real suffering all over and deep down.

If the birth of Jesus is the foundation of our relationship with God then maybe this is the year the message comes through with greater clarity.

We've been grounded in more ways than one, this year. Rooted where we are for better or worse. Made uncomfortably aware of our mortality and reliance upon each other's toil.

Luke's biblical talk of governors, registrations, lockdowns and decrees seems timelier than the last time we heard it. It sounds eerily reminiscent of the world we wake up in each morning - opening the paper to hospitalization rates and death counts as if they were the weather. *News Voice*: Community spread is flat today with a slight chance of cluster zones after the holidays. If you're going out, bring PPE.

These numbers and reports, of course, represent our mothers, our brothers and sisters. By any measure, this has been an *annus horribilis* filled with disease, calamity, separation, loss and death. We have seen more than enough, more than enough, to fill the human heart with despair. And that brings us right up to this moment. Right here to this cathedral – to this nativity. Whether we are physically present or joining online – (I can see many of you here in my Zoom magic mirror)

We have come together to hear again the Good News that hope *conquers* despair. That *Joy* comes in the morning. Not in some abstract philosophical way – but in the mundane drudgery of our daily lives. In each small act of empathy and mutual-regard given and received. Into this sin-sick, weary world - Christ is born. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.

Into this mask-wearing, antibody-testing, cabin-fevering, school-closing, life-risking, vaccine-seeking, neighbor-feeding, job-losing, friend-burying, climate-changing, leadership-vacuuming, zoom-bombing, relief-packaging, culture-warring, race-crafting, fragile world, God's lowly might is brought to birth.

This birth of God does not happen in some fantasy land far, far away where all is calm and all is bright...No. It happens in this mess we know. Christ is born into the great unjust jumble of life.

Christmas is a moment of spiritual gravity in a world of free-floating anxiety and fear. Of orbiting concerns and terrors. The Incarnation plants our feet firmly again on the Ground of Our Being and reminds us of who we are and who we are becoming in Christ: ministers to the fed up, the washed out and the weary – ministers to each other and so many more.

It would make all the sense in the world if we wanted to write off this Christmas as a disappointment not to be repeated - A frustrating half-holiday in which we can't do most of what we want to do. Can't see the people we want to see. But to forget this Christmas along with other times we would rather not remember - would only add loss to loss. This Christmas night God offer us a gift that only darkness can bring:

The Good News that we Christians don't discover God in our striving, our achievements and successes. Rather, God finds us in our failures, our despondency and listlessness. In the darkness, God is mighty to save. In the vulnerability and bewilderment of these day, God is holding us together.

This is the year to discover that incarnational faith is not about reaching to grasp the rings the world holds up as salvation. Incarnational faith is about falling into God's arms and acknowledging that our lives have become unmanageable.

When we find ourselves making frustrated U-turns followed by moments of shame in the driveway, here's what to do: Give up. Admit defeat. Be not afraid. God will hold you down even as God raises you up. You won't float away. "In returning and rest [we] shall be saved. In quietness and in trust shall be [our] strength" (Isaiah 30:15a)

Gravity by Sara Bareilles

(Performed by Connor Liddell and Cora Winstead)

Something always brings me back to you  
It never takes too long  
No matter what I say or do  
I'll still feel you here 'till the moment I'm gone

You hold me without touch  
You keep me without chains  
I never wanted anything so much than to drown in your love  
And not feel your reign

Set me free, leave me be  
I don't want to fall another moment into your gravity  
Here I am, and I stand  
So tall, just the way I'm supposed to be  
But you're on to me and all over me

Oh, you loved me 'cause I'm fragile  
When I thought that I was strong  
But you touch me for a little while  
And all my fragile strength is gone

Set me free, leave me be  
I don't want to fall another moment into your gravity  
Here I am, and I stand  
So tall, just the way I'm supposed to be  
But you're on to me and all over me

I live here on my knees as I try to make you see  
That you're everything I think I need here on the ground  
But you're neither friend nor foe though I can't seem to let you go  
The one thing that I still know is that you're keeping me down  
You're keeping me down, eh ooh  
You're on to me, on to me, and all over

Something always brings me back to you  
It never takes too long

AMEN.

