

Rudolph at the Manger? Why not?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock Service, December 25, 2010, Christmas Day: The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Based on John 1:1-14.*

Yesterday afternoon I missed a call from my grandchildren; happily they left a message. They had called, the message reported, to sing me a Christmas carol. Because they are truly exceptional—if you knew them you would totally agree—and because I am missing them this holiday season, I got teary as I prepared to hear them sweetly singing, “Away in a Manger,” the carol that precious children like them sing all around the world. Alas, the Christmas carol they had chosen for their grandfather, the priest, was “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” For the record Rudolph was not a part of the first noel and his theme song is not a Christmas carol. I am just saying. And yet, in the magic that is Christmas, by the time they had finished, I was thinking of adding Rudolph to my crèche, imagining what a nice addition his shiny red nose would bring to the manger drab! Who can say for sure that he wasn’t there; and if he wasn’t, he should have been. It is Christmas, friends, and love shines in all sorts of faces and places and in all kinds and conditions of music!

I don’t know what has brought each of you here this Christmas morning, but whatever the reasons I believe they are all good. Your presence here means that you join me in saying in all the ways that we can mean it and in some ways we can only hope to mean it: *Christ is born; come let us adore him*. He has come again and promises to keep coming for as long as our hearts are open and even when they are not. In the end, that may be the very best news of all, though it is often as a threat—ready or not, Christ comes. No doubt the light that is Christ is fanned and spread by the openness of our hearts; but even a clinched one, a closed heart (as ours sometimes is) is not enough to extinguish this light that has come and continues to come into the world. And so with Isaiah, we proclaim, *Break forth together into singing, O people of God, for God has comforted God’s people and redeems Jerusalem, the place within each of us, which for so long has stood and stands in need of redemption*.

In the beginning was the Word, in the beginning was the story, in the beginning was the hope. Christmas did not bring God into the world. God was and is and will be in the world, not our creation and never our singular possession. But Christmas is the story of God’s coming in a particular and incarnate way *for us*; it is our story, a story about which to feel not exclusively correct—bad words, these are, *exclusively correct*; we do best when we do not claim to possess ultimate understanding or faith or knowledge—but a story that embraces without reticence our distinct window into the mystery and majesty of God. It is the window that for us allows the most vivid access to God, not the only one, but ours.

Like most of you, probably, Christmas is a time when I touch base with the important people in my life, some blood kin and some kin by choice. Yesterday, I spent some holy time on the telephone with a cherished friend in another city, one of those folks with whom there is no pretense, where both joy and sadness are unadorned, as bare as any stable we might imagine to have been the venue for Jesus’ entrance into this complicated and wonderful world. She and I are of an age that has covered enough life to know the highs and lows and all the moments in between. In our way, the way of those who have spent, some might argue, a decade or two too

long in therapy, we pondered the anecdotal truth in our lives, hers and mine, that big things often happen at Christmas. Break-ups occur and people die and spectacular pretense gets shattered and other momentous truth telling takes place sometimes with all the flare of the best fireworks show. I am, after all, “gothically” southern; we specialize in such displays. Of course, fatigue, overeating, over drinking, and over expecting help set the stage for such explosions, but it is more than that, more than just that confluence of excess. The longer I live the less surprised I am by the real life poignancy of Christmas. Despite the romanticism that has grown up around it, from the earliest infancy narratives, so rich in yearning and imagination, to the ridiculous and much less charming promise that all we need for Christmas can be purchased with our American Express card, a transaction which will even give us airline miles, despite all that, Christmas moves us profoundly. In a way that defies understanding Christmas is about truth, the urgency of which surprises us every year. It is about the unadorned truth that we need God, that we need a Savior, that we need Emmanuel, “God with us.” And, though, we may not be quite as clear in our own understanding of it we claim with John that *the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

And still Christ comes, a forever process for us. When the tinsel and the stuffing are gone later this afternoon, when bright colored paper and bows are disassembled and strewn about, when the nativity with or without Rudolph gets replaced in its special box for yet another year, Christ indeed will have come, will have come again and will continue to come.

Yesterday afternoon a reporter from one of the television stations interviewed me about what our Christmas message would be this year. In between worrying about how many chins would should up on her screen, I told her our message is the same this year as it is every year—that darkness does not win, not ultimately, not in our hearts and not in the world and that goodness champions over evil, not in every instance but ultimately for God is God and God is good, bringing again and again inextinguishable light in a world that often opts for darkness. And I told her that as a community of believers we attempt to be a part of that light, claiming neither for ourselves or for others precision in doctrine nor perfection in life or worship, claiming instead our hope and our conviction that the light will continue to shine and that we will love one another, living as much like Jesus as we can—the adult Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the one who brings good will to all.

Merry, merry Christmas, dear friends. The light of Christ lives on among us.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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