



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## ***God Didn't Have to Do Christmas Christmas Eve, 2010***

**The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

When you are a child, there is no question whether Christmas is a better holiday than Easter. How can a basket of chocolate eggs and jelly beans possibly compete with the traditions, anticipation, longing and advertisement induced expectations of Christmas? Houses, sometimes entire communities, are transformed with lights and decorations. Favorite foods tempt you at every turn. Our culture and economy proclaim the supremacy of Christmas.

As we mature in our spiritual journey, however, we begin to appreciate the significance of Easter. Holy Week carries its own powerful story full of pathos and drama, and as the hymn claims, "tis the queen of seasons bright." The focus of Easter is admittedly quite different, harder to commercialize and much more dynamic in its themes—sadness and sorrow, giving way to joy and celebration. It is the most profound and holy day of the year.

But the more I've thought about the contrast between Christmas and Easter, the more I have come to appreciate Christmas, because, you see, God didn't have to do Christmas. Once God chose to do Christmas, a new path was forged and eventually humanity forced God's hand—human violence and the rejection of love demanded a response from God and it was a good one. But the truth remains that God did not have to do Christmas in the first place. It was an entirely unexpected, novel, bold move, a gift so wonderful that it inspired everything we know about Christmas, especially the giving and receiving.

God's decision to enter the human experience elevates us and the rest of humanity and forces us to accept that we are all interesting and loveable enough to play host to the Creator of all that is. Imagine if the person you admired the most in the world suddenly wanted to spend time with you – to know all about you, to listen to you complain, to look at your family photo albums and sit with you as you wait for the doctor to get back to you with those test results. Fairly inconceivable but that's what Christmas is. God didn't have to do that, and I find it a rather incredible gift of outreach.

*The Zohar* is the central text of the Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah. It teaches many things about the nature of God and humanity and identifies God's fundamental desire to give – to share the Divine light. The heavens and the earth and all that is therein were created to receive God's light. Spiritual maturity for us is achieved when our natural desire to receive evolves into a desire to receive in order to share. Christmas is an initiative from the very heart of God – generous desire to share the light in a most accessible form – that of human presence.



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If we were to take this impulse – to be present with and for others – and receive it in order to share – what might happen? Where the human race is right now reminds me of the old stereotype of a New Yorker, existing in the midst of millions of people and yet passing through them never really seeing or knowing them. Imagine yourself there – content to maintain the self-imposed force field around you that keeps others out, not realizing how imprisoned you are by it. Your neighbors are vague presences glimpsed through windows across a courtyard, distant, and unknown. Yet every one of them is a world of stories waiting to be read.

Living like that you would never know that your unmet neighbor is a professional pastry chef whose confections are nearly all you need to believe in heaven. Or how could you guess at the wealth of history stored in the 90 year memory of the small quiet man living upstairs. He had been one of the fresh faced soldiers among those who liberated Paris in 1944. Young women had run out into the street to kiss him and his eyes still dance at that memory.

You would never know about the poetry written late at night by the young mother as she sits listening to the labored breathing of her daughter who was born with a heart that wasn't quite right. In those moments she pours her fears for the child and herself onto blank pages in her journal, each word aching with love's uncertainty. Her verse is for herself; she has no idea how perfect it is and how much others might need to hear it.

Then there is the man down the hall who spends his days working in an insurance office but his love affair with the heavens and the movement of the cosmos fills his imagination, bookshelves and spare hours. His telescope is small compared to his vision. There is an asteroid that he discovered zooming around the galaxy with the name he earned the right to bestow. On his next vacation, he will visit a mountaintop observatory and listen to the music of deep space.

The unread stories around you include those of pain like yours or adventures you always meant to try. Some stories might change you; others might be changed because of you, but they all have one thing in common, they are waiting for you to come and read them.

God didn't have to do Christmas, but love combined with a desire to know and be known overcame divine inertia. God has come among us saying "I love you so much, that I can no longer endure this distance." In the child born tonight, God will know our humanness and we will know God's heart.

What does God learn of our humanness? We are born quite helpless and subject to many influences for good and for ill. We are born with a capacity for joy and laughter and respond best to love and being challenged. We are capable of appreciating beauty and wonder and mystery. At our best we are adaptable and flexible and open.



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But God also learns that we have a shocking capacity for evil and all too often allow fear to think for us. Indifference to the stories of others is our shame. We are reluctant to share for fear of scarcity. It is as God encounters this less attractive side of our nature that we learn the most about God's heart. Christmas is our reminder that even as we live out our worst, God continues to come to be with us and love us into loving one another.

This child tonight is us and God in the same time and place. The two worlds are reconciled in the newborn possibilities of living as if the kingdom has come.

Richard Wilbur is a former Poet Laureate of the US and he summed up all of this in his beautiful poem that has become one of our Christmas hymns.

A stable lamp is lighted whose glow shall wake the sky  
The stars shall bend their voices, and every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry and straw like gold shall shine;  
A barn shall harbor heaven, a stall become a shrine.

This child through David's city shall ride in triumph by;  
The palm shall strew its branches and every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry; though heavy dull and dumb,  
And lie within the road way to pave his kingdom come

Yet he shall be forsaken, and yielded up to die;  
The sky shall groan and darken, and every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry for stony hearts of men;  
God's blood upon the spear-head, God's love refused again.

But now, as at the ending, the low is lifted high;  
The stars shall bend their voices, and every stone shall cry,  
And every stone shall cry, in praises of the Child  
By whose descent among us the worlds are reconciled.