

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

**“God is nowhere”**

**John 1: 1-14**

**Reverend Art Ritter**

*1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

*10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

*14 And 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.*

A mother was tucking in her son into bed one night. Outside a fierce thunderstorm was rolling through the area and the little boy was terrified. As his mother turned off the light, the boy's voice trembled, "Mommy, can you stay with me all night?" His mother returned to his bedside, gave him an encouraging hug and said, "I can't stay here dear. I have to sleep in Daddy's room." There was a long silence as the mother walked out the door. Finally the child's voice rang out, "The big sissy!"

Do you know what it is like to be afraid of something that is bigger, more mysterious, and more powerful than you are? Nineteenth century American president Benjamin Harrison and his wife were so intimidated by the newfangled electricity in the White House and they dared not touch any light switches. If there were no servants around to turn off the light when the Harrisons went to bed, they slept with the lights on.

Theodore Roosevelt, as a child, was afraid to step inside his church. He was terrified of something called "the zeal." He believed it crouched in the dark corners of the church, ready to jump out at unsuspecting persons. He wasn't certain what a zeal was, but he imagined it to be something like an alligator or dragon. Young Roosevelt had heard the minister read from the gospel of John these words: "The zeal of the house hath eaten me up."

Christmas tends to be easier before it gets here. In the season of Advent, Christmas is a promise or a dream. It is an expectation that we place upon some future time. It is twinkling lights, Santa Claus, and evergreen wreaths. But this morning, Christmas is here. It is real. It is in our hands. The presence of God has come into our lives and our world and it demands that something be different.

The Germans have an expression that can be translated, "gift is task." In other words, with God's gift comes a responsibility to receive and use the gift well. Are we ready to handle that? Are we ready to put that to the test?

The entrance of God into our situation is rather intimidating. We might be afraid that if we took it seriously, Christmas would seriously alter our world. We might be worried that living Christmas would force us to truly live by faith, something that is never a comfortable experience.

Perhaps you are puzzled about the title of the sermon this morning. Perhaps you thought that the space bar on the computer keyboard got stuck for a few moments. How do you read that which is printed there? The letters in the sentence can be separated to form the statement, "God is nowhere." Perhaps this is what ready want after Christmas—a world unchanged so we can live as if nothing has changed. But without a single letter change, the sentence can also be read as "God is now here." You see, it is all a matter of perception. God is nowhere. Or God is now here.

What must God do to assure us that God is now here? What must God do to convince us skeptics, to remove our fear? In Christ, God becomes present in the flesh. That is a fact that may confuse us when we have already made up our minds that we can get by on self-reliance and self-made plans. Christ is Emmanuel; God with us, even when we don't see that presence and the whole thing seems like the figment of some crazy prophet's imagination. But God is patient beyond our stubbornness and beyond our lack of faith. We get to celebrate the divine coming each and every year. We do this not simply as a remembrance of something long ago and far away. We do this as an acknowledgement of God's continuous presence and of Christ's endless comings to be with us. If our minds are made up, we need to think again.

In the fall of 1937, reports of Nazi violence and oppression in Europe cast ominous shadows across the Atlantic Ocean. The Roman Catholic mystic, Thomas Merton, was then a journalism student at Columbia University. Writing in such a situation he described the amazing ways in which God acted to "rescue us from the confusion and the misery in which we had come to find ourselves, partly through our own fault, and partly through circumstances." In the darkness of that time Merton said that friendship, books, ideas, poetry, art, anxiety about war, even the noisy streets and aging buildings of New York City were the instruments through which God's grace intersected with his life and brought salvation. Merton added that while we wait for some sensible and tangible jolt from God to get us started, we live our lives doing all of the things that normally exclude an opportunity for God to appear and which nullify the grace of God. We fail to put God to the test. We act as if God is nowhere instead of living as if God is now here.

I recall reading about a minister who gave a children's sermon on the Sunday before Christmas. He was trying to drive home the point that on Christmas, God came in an unexpected way and in an unexpected time and place. He opened the floor for suggestions as to where the children thought that Jesus might be born today. One of the children suggested McDonald's. The minister, trying to encourage such free thought replied, "Yes, I believe that it is possible for God to come to McDonald's!" With that, one of the other children shouted, "God is at McDonald's! Which one? Can we go eat with him after church?" Such believers in the possibility of God's presence we should all be.

Last night we journeyed together to the birthplace of hope and reassurance. There may be much about that that makes us afraid. There may be much that causes us doubt. But there is a word; there is a promised presence that enables us to move on. The word is Emmanuel, God with us.

Christmas is the sign of God's presence in our world. It is the sign of God's presence in our lives. The sign calls us to live faithfully in God's promise. The sign brings us courage in our times of darkness. Today, perhaps in the days ahead, we will hear or see the sign again. It may come in the quiet whisper of a loved one. It may come in the reassuring touch of a friend. It may come in the silence of prayer. It may come when a family gathers for a meal. God will offer a sign. When we see it or hear it, we will recognize it and we will remember that we have seen and heard it before. God is now here. That is why we celebrate this day.