

December 24, 2011
Christmas Eve
The Rev. Canon Robert D. Edmunds
Trinity Church, Wrentham/St. John's Church, Franklin

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Images of Christmas Eves which you have enjoyed in years past are no doubt floating through your minds this evening – if such images were not there before I mentioned the idea, images will be showing up any moment now in your mind's eye.

Images of the Currier and Ives variety are possible as you bounded through the snow to grandmother's house along a snow covered road. Images of children jumping up and down with uncontrollable glee on Christmas morning. Images of older members of your family sitting back, smiling and just taking in all the wondrous chaos. Images of burning all the wrapping paper in the fireplace – one step away from burning the house down -- it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Maybe images of a Christmas or two when you were away from family and friends – maybe you were in the military, or on some other responsibility which kept you from home. That reality certainly strikes a chord tonight as we remember all those who serve our nation in far away and dangerous places; home now largely from Iraq, but so many more now in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Perhaps you have experienced a Christmas during a time of estrangement from family and friends on a cold winter's night, lonely and confused, seemingly long ago and far away.

There are images of church services, choirs leading hymns which lead us to tears, Christmas Pageants when there were several Marys, more than three wise men and nobody wanted to be a sheep, so we had horses instead. Then there's always the angel who was simply perfect, right from central casting and the real newborn infant who played the baby Jesus. And as it should be with all Christmas Pageants, hardly a dry eye in the house, no matter how many Marys there are.

A great deal of energy – kilowatts beyond number, lots of emotion, mountains of expectations and lately and nowadays even pages of commentary about politically correct ways to express greetings among us go into the Christmas experience. It's huge. It's really huge. So, take a deep breath, you're safe here. If it isn't done by now, it might not get done, whatever it is – and that's OK. Take a deep breath and relax; God loves you whether that last present is perfectly wrapped or not. God loves you even if you forgot the sour cream for the onion dip. You're safe here, just as safe as Mary was in the stable in Bethlehem.

I am among you as one who on the one hand, observes all of the energy and expectation, and also on the other hand as one who gets caught up in that same energy and expectation. I have spent some considerable time in wonder about the whole Christmas thing. It strikes me that even if we strip away all the gift giving, all the decorations, all the travel to family and friends, all the Christmas pageantry, all the Dickens kinds of stories, we are left with a human truth.

A truth which has no regard for ethnic background, racial roots, cultural differences or religious orientation. Human beings share a need which spans all the continents because life is unpredictable. Every one of us across all of time and around the world gets thrown curve balls in our lives. Try as we might, we cannot see what will happen tomorrow or next week. Our plans for the future can change in a heartbeat. It is good to remember that we are not alone.

If we are to talk about a rapid change of plans – talk with Mary, the mother of Jesus. I do not believe she woke up one morning and decided to be the mother of the Christ-child. Her life took a turn she did not expect. After talking with Mary, walk outside the stable and have a cup of tea with Joseph. This couple, as we might say, just had to deal.

And what did they have to work with? A used donkey, the clothes on their backs; and to be sure, a little help from the gifts of the wise men didn't hurt. But those are just the material things. What kept them going? What keeps you going when your life takes an unexpected turn? The unpredictable could be wonderful, or it could be devastating. What keeps you going?

I believe all of humanity from all time and forever, around the world and before today and after tomorrow needs hope. Regardless of religious orientation, ethnicity or race, human beings need to find hope. Life is so unpredictable. For me, and maybe for you, hope is what keeps me from abject panic, anxiety gone crazy and despair on steroids.

For Christians, for all who believe in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, tonight is the night we celebrate God's gift of hope in the birth of the Christ-child. While the future is unpredictable for all of us, God did a wise thing in coming among us as an infant.

Babies are all about the future. Babies point forward. Babies are all about hope. Hope that a baby or two will grow up to find the cure for cancer and for AIDS; hope that maybe a few babies will grow up to inspire and motivate us old folks to grow closer to God; hope that more babies than ever before will love peace more than they love war; hope that babies born today will live in a world where suffering, starvation and economic exploitation are found only in stories written in history books. Hope that their future will be better than our past.

Yes, rest easy this night. God loves you. God's love came down at Christmas to take away your fear, your worry and your anxiety and to fill you with hope. Drink deeply of that gift this night, confident that in the new day God is with you, come what may.

We celebrate the hope that was born tonight in a cave used as a stable in a little town called Bethlehem where Joseph went, because he was of the house and lineage of David, with Mary, his betrothed. Hope was born this night, long ago and far away. Hope that God will stand by you. Hope that God will stand by me. Hope that God will stand by all of creation.

Hope that in the good times and the bad times, in the times of celebration and the times of mourning, that despair will be no more and our hearts will sing of hope.

Merry Christmas, good friends, Merry Christmas.

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.