

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Holiness Everywhere”

something I hear frequently, from all different kinds of people, expressed in many different ways, is that there is a clear distinction between what is holy and what is not holy; objects, places, people; it is such a common presumption that there is a recognizable difference between what is sacred and what is profane; for example: a church building is seen as holy, anyplace else is not; the Holy Land is seen as holy, other lands are not; the Holy Bible is seen as holy, other books are not; monks, nuns, priests (all those in ‘holy orders’) or lay persons who stand out from the crowd because of their work and devotion are seen as holy, other people are not

maybe you have thought this way; I’m not criticizing if you have; it is so common that it may even be a characteristic of our human nature; I’m no student of anthropology or of history of all the world’s religious practices, but I sense that all religions have held this belief and practice to a large extent

I use word ‘presumption’ on purpose, because I believe our Christian faith demonstrates something quite different than this split; and that one of the most significant messages that comes to us at this season, on this particular night of Christmas, is that God demonstrated something quite different to us in sending Jesus, our Lord and Savior, the eternal King of heaven and earth, to be born in a manger--really it was a cattle feeding trough; ‘manger’ sounds holy, ‘feeding trough’ does not!

Jesus’ lowly birth was not a temporary worldly condescension; it was not just by chance that his birth occasions the visits of both holy angels and smelly shepherds; his whole life was lived in an ambiguity and mix of holiness and worldliness; recall how his detractors repeatedly accused him and his disciples of not following holy practices of cleanliness or of associating with the wrong kind of people (unholy Samaritans, loose women, lepers, tax collectors, gentiles); and in his resurrection life beyond Easter morning his closest friends didn’t recognize him as someone visibly holy (he calls to Mary in the garden, he breaks bread with people at Emmaus, he invites his disciples to a breakfast of broiled fish on the beach); how can we separate the holy from the unholy if we cannot even be expected to recognize the holy face of Jesus?

he could be anywhere; he could be here, or in our homes, or at our offices, or in our gardens, or on our streets! would we be able to recognize him in any of those presumably unholy places?

the message I would like for each of us to ponder and take home with us this Christmas Eve is that holiness is all around us; holiness is all around us because God is all around us; holiness is all around us because God's will and ways are being worked out all around us; holiness is all around us because each of us is a participant in bringing God's kingdom about here on earth in everything we touch in our lives; holiness is all around us because each of us is a holy person by virtue of the Holy Spirit that was implanted within us at our Holy Baptism; holiness is all around us because that holiness is refreshed and renewed by Holy Communion; and most of all holiness is all around us because Jesus deigned to come to earth and live among us, as one of us; that's what the Incarnation is all about; that's what Christmas is all about

holiness slips into our lives like Santa Claus coming down the chimney; so we must ask ourselves how can we best expect and anticipate its arrival?; how might we have something more than cookies and milk waiting there in expectation of holiness' visit?; God's gifts (that what holiness is, a gift from God) lie waiting for us to unwrap, like packages sitting under the Christmas tree; how long will we wait before unwrapping them?; how long shall we delay before discovering that God has carefully and lovingly selected for each of us--those very things that exceed our heart's greatest desire? namely love, peace, and joy, in an eternal relationship with God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and with all of God's people, from all nations, from across all time

glimpses of holiness dance in our heads like visions of sugarplums; how long until we rouse ourselves from sleep and claim those visions for the holy reality that they represent?; how long will we try to convince ourselves that those dreams are out of reach, that they could not be real, that God couldn't really have such a thing as holiness in store for someone like me, someone like you, someone like the strangers outside of any church?; tonight, picture Jesus in that rough feeding trough, yet with a miraculous star shining brightly above; picture this as a reminder that Jesus is reborn not just at Christmas, but every day, every time, in each of our lives, when we allow his holiness to shine through us