

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 24, 2020

All Years, Christmas (I), Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#)

[Psalm 96](#)

[Titus 2:11-14](#)

[Luke 2:1-14\(15-20\)](#)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; for to us a child is born. **Amen.**

+ + +

I have a pair of relatives I love who are deeply involved in an organization called the Compassionate Friends. Maybe you know of it. It's a peer support group for people who are grieving the death of a child. After their adult son died a number of years ago, my relatives found this organization. And they found people who were going through something similar. People to be with them, to hold their grief together, and to figure out together how to live a life with hope and meaning in the face of unfathomable loss. The Compassionate Friends are based on the simple truth that when you're suffering, it helps to have someone there with you—and not just anyone, but someone who's been there; someone who's gone through it themselves.

Now it may not seem very Christmassy to start a sermon by talking about grieving a child. Christmas is about the birth of a child, and we talk about joy and comfort and peace on earth. Christmas is about good news. But let's be real. This Christmas we need good news that can speak to grief. Candy canes and tinsel aren't enough. And of course the reality is that every Christmas is complicated. There are people grieving every Christmas and we always need to hear a message that can offer real hope to our real human lives. But how clear that is this year. Right now across this country nearly six hundred children remain separated from their parents in the name of the citizens of this country. Cynical leaders continue to tell blatant falsehoods to sow mistrust and undermine the legitimacy of democratic voting. Our society has seen a rising recognition of just how pervasive racial bias still is—a recognition that is itself a good thing but has come at a terrible price through the

deaths of countless black and brown children of God. And through it all we are in a devastating pandemic, with more people falling ill around us each day. Some are dying; some are grieving; many have lost income and some are struggling to pay rent or put food on the table; and everyone in the entire world has experienced some form of isolation and anxiety this year.

So we could use a Compassionate Friend. And that's the first part of the good news of Christmas.

There are a lot of angels in the stories of Christmas playing support roles, appearing to Mary, or Joseph, or the shepherds. And an angel is good. But an angel really isn't down there in it with you. Angels don't get sick or lonely or lose their jobs or get killed. And the first part of the good news is that when it came right down to it, God didn't just send an angel. God came personally, right down into the mess with us. Tonight we celebrate the birth of God incarnate, which is a fancy word that just means *flesh*, like the Spanish word *carne*. Jesus was incarnate as a baby who got cold and hungry. Who was pushed around and manipulated by cynical leaders, first at his birth when government leaders forced his parents to travel and find lodging where they could and lay him in a feed box, later at his death, put on trial in service to the state and religious leaders' agendas. Who knew what it was to be lonely, to be poor, to have nowhere to lay his head. Whose own followers didn't really understand him. Who died on a cross, surrounded by Roman police and struggling to breathe.

Jesus is our Compassionate Friend. If you're lonely, sick, or grieving, know that Jesus has been there. And he has shown up here in the world to be here with you. That's the first part of the good news.

But there's a second part. Because yes, we need someone with us, someone with skin on, someone who's gone through something like what we're going through. But when you're suffering you can also use something more than solidarity—you can use a rescue. If you're drowning, and someone jumps in with you, you don't want them to just come drown with you—you want them to be a lifeguard with lifesaving gear. If you're sick, you don't want someone to just come catch your illness—you want a doctor in protective gear to come offer you a cure. If you're stifling under someone's knee, you don't want someone to climb down under the other knee—you want someone strong to push the bully off you.

And that's also what Jesus came to do. He came to be with us, *and* to help us. To suffer the worst of what evil can do alongside us, *and* to defeat it.

Today is Christmas. But this story continues beyond the birth of a baby. It continues through Jesus's life, his teaching, healing, loving people, challenging them, forgiving them, setting them free. His threatening the powers that were. His arrest, trial, and death. And then Easter. His blowing open the gates of death. And in a way that's where the story really begins, with the triumph of a new way of being alive that Jesus has pioneered and is passing along to his beloved people.

Right now you and I are waiting on pins and needles for a vaccine to defeat COVID-19, to take this specter that has been dominating the world for the past year and throw it into history. Jesus came to defeat death itself, to take that specter that has been dominating the world for all of time and throw it into history. He came to inoculate us with a new kind of life, his own immortal life. We catch that life when we fall in love with him, put our trust in him, and when we're joined with him by being baptized in his name. And we get a booster dose of it every time we gather around his table and share the bread and wine that are his Body and Blood. So what we're doing tonight is one more chapter in the story of Christmas, because that same person who came to us in the manger is present among us here today, and he's ready to feed us once more with the medicine of salvation, whether it's here at church or in your home, tonight or tomorrow.

Here at this church we call ourselves the Church of the Incarnation. The Church of God made flesh, God with skin on. This is a community where we practice that life, the life of Jesus, in our own very imperfect but committed way. If you're looking for a community to practice that Jesus life with, join us. Or join another. But answer the call of Jesus to follow him, to be filled with his Spirit and be shaped by him into the kind of people who live forever and love forever. And God will use you to transform the world into a world more like that vision of the prophet Isaiah, where all the yokes of slavery and all the weapons of war are broken and burned, where the people rejoice with joy at the abundant harvest, where there shall be endless peace. For to us this night a child is born; a compassionate friend, and a mighty Savior. O come, let us adore.