

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine  
Christmas Eve 2008  
The Rt. Rev. Mark S. Sisk

Merry Christmas! Once again, it is my honor to welcome you, in the name of the people of the Diocese of New York. And I do welcome you. The founding vision of this Cathedral was, and remains, that it be a place of open arms welcoming any and all people into the all-consuming and life-giving embrace of God's ever loving presence.

So welcome. Welcome to this great, this awesome Cathedral. But beautiful and awesome though it may be, it is as nothing compared to the wonder and beauty of the story that we celebrate tonight: the story of the birth of Jesus, Son of God, son of Mary.

It is because the story of Christmas is so simple, its characters so attractive, its sentiments so universal, and its message clear, even people who are not Christians know its general outline.

The story's central message is, "Emmanuel," God with us." This is such a stunning claim, one so far from our ordinary frame of reference, that it is very difficult to grasp hold of. Consequently some folks miss the point entirely. However, most people, without perhaps really understanding the full wonder of what they are seeing, do in fact get a glimpse of the mystery of God's love that this story reveals.

Paradoxically it is the simplicity of the story that makes it quite easy for us to miss other, deep levels of meaning, that are hidden from us - right in plain sight.

This evening I want to think with you about just one of those dimensions -but it is an important one. And that dimension is this: God's unlikely and unsettling habit, of working from the edges.

I describe God's "habit" of working from the edges as "unlikely" for the simple reason that we, just like countless generations before us, have quite reasonably, associated God with might, majesty and power. Our creeds refer to God as, Father Almighty, and countless of our prayers open with those or similar words.

Since God is Almighty it seems only logical to expect that God would choose the rich and powerful through whom to act: those at society's center.

However, the deeply unsettling experience of the community of faith through the centuries has been just the opposite. God acts in unanticipated ways. The one thing that seems most predictable about God's action is its unpredictability. That is to say that God seems, almost invariably, to choose to act from the margins, the edges, of life, of society, by choosing the most vulnerable, the most unlikely, outcasts even, to work the Divine Will.

Think of Israel: it originated as a small nomadic band wandering through what we now call the ancient middle-east. This tribe, which was really little more than an extended family group, was captured and enslaved. Taken from their homeland they served the mighty Egyptian Pharaohs. And then, against all odds, God led them out of that slavery through the desert wilderness into the Promised Land.

Or take as an example Israel's great King David. He was not a man born to power. When he seemed to forget that, as people in power often seem to do, God's reminded him, that

I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel. 2 Samuel 7:8

So the great king David was himself from the margins. He was called by God from tending sheep on the barren hills of Israel. But he was not the last to be chosen from such barren margins.

Think of Jesus. As our Gospel for tonight reminds us, and every child could tell us, was born in a stable because that little family could find no room in the inn. It's a familiar story that's very familiarity blunts its sharp edges. It's a familiar story whose ancient beauty and romanticized associations, blinds us to its realities.

If we dare to look beyond this cozy and heavily romanticized idyll of bucolic serenity to examine what was really happening, we will be forced to confront the painful reality of a young family's desperation. In human terms the story of the nativity is, nothing less than a terrifying human crisis.

Think of it: a young family, on the road, far from home, no place to stay: a young mother ready to deliver her first child, with no mother, no sisters, no friends, and no mid-wife there to help. She's a woman vulnerable and alone - with only a man to help: a man who, however well intended he might have been, would almost certainly not have the faintest clue as to how to assist a woman in a child birth.

Remarkably enough this appears to be pretty much the way God does things. God calls upon, relies upon, the most unlikely people: those from the most vulnerable, most fragile, margins of society.

Even those first witnesses, the shepherds were from the margins of society, people who had a rather unsavory reputation. Interestingly, given the role they were called to fulfill as heralds of this great event, scholars tell us that shepherds were not admitted in court as witnesses.

Two implications of this habit of God's of working from the edges are especially pertinent.

The first is the most obvious. As we relate to people in the world around us, we need always to remember that it is among those on the margins, the edges, that is to say, the poor, the sick, the homeless, the helpless, the immigrant, the vulnerable, that the presence of God is to be found most vibrantly. To be in touch with the Christmas spirit is to care for those at the margins. Not just during the Christmas season, but all year round. Not just because we're trying to be nice, but rather because that is where God is most easily and obviously to be seen: among those who are the outcasts, the helpless the forgotten. There, among them, God is to be found - strengthening, comforting, consoling, encouraging: in Darfur, the Congo, the Sudan, but also on merchant ships abandoned by their owners, in the forest of India, the streets of Gaza, and even the streets of this great city. Wherever there are desperate people, hurting, and in need - God is there.

The second implication of God's habit of working from the margins strikes even closer to home. As we look within ourselves to find signs of God's action we need to look at the hard and often painful edges of our lives: the times of pain or grief, sickness, hurt, the times of disappointment, or fear, times such as now perhaps when financial insecurity looms so ominously, times of failure, times of sin and doubt. Remarkably enough it is there, if we look closely, and listen carefully, even, and especially at times of desperation, that we can often most easily see God's loving hand at work helping us through.

I could not begin to tell you how many people have told me that when they were at their deepest point of despair, that they felt God's consoling presence most intensely bringing them back to themselves.

If we have the courage to look at our failures, our sins: the times we failed to live up to the promise that is ours in God, then we will see God's loving hand beckoning us onward, and encouraging us to learn from our mistakes to discover our true selves.

This is the way that God works: from the edges, from the edges of our world, from the edges of our lives. May this Christmas season help us remember this old, yet always surprising truth. As we look for Jesus in our world and in our lives, let us remember to look to those edges, those margins. And there we will see a glimpse of the promised life that comes from God.

So let us this Christmas night look to those edges that there we might grasp the truth of "Emmanuel, God with", now, this night, and unto the ages of ages. AMEN.

Merry Christmas