

First Sunday after Christmas
Grace Episcopal Church, Jefferson City
December 31, 2023

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Behold! A young woman shall bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” The prophecy is fulfilled. The son is born. We greeted his arrival two weeks ago, at a manger of all places. God is with us, Grace Church! Merry Christmas!

Debbie and Claire and I visited Gabrielle and Lee in Virginia last week. On Christmas morning we walked over to Emmanuel Episcopal Church and celebrated Christmas Eucharist with a congregation that calls itself “God is with us.” It was pretty good.

Emmanuel Church had one service on Christmas Day. It was at 10 am, and it was low-key. Just a few of us gathered, and we were all a little sleepy; maybe not very different from what happened here, and also at most Episcopal churches across the country. After the service, Gabrielle and I peeked into the parish hall, and we saw evidence that there had been a wild Christmas Eve pageant the night before. The large room has a stage at one end, and it was plastered with hand-drawn snowmen. Tables were pushed back against the walls, and each one had two or three “costume stations” on it. A sign taped to the edge of one table read “Shepherds,” and there were dozens of miniature shepherds’ crooks, bathrobes, and paper beards to hook over your ears. Another sign read “Angels,” and there was a stack of wings and halos. Our favorite was the “Marys” station. Evidently anybody who wanted to could step up and put on a light blue wrap, a dark blue head shawl, and a nice headband, and become Mary, one of the stars join in the exciting drama. The priest said that about 300 people attended the Christmas Eve services, and I pictured seventeen Marys, of all shapes and sizes, processing up to the manger amid shepherds and angels and crazy snowmen in a family and friendly celebration that was wonderful and also just a little bit holy.

Gabrielle went to Emmanuel church earlier in December, on the Second Sunday of Advent, and she said that St. Nicholas made a surprise visit at the end of the service. Everybody received a program and a large candy cane when they arrived, and right before the dismissal a fully decked-out, larger-than-life St. Nicholas cried out “Ho, ho, ho!” at the back of the nave. Then he proceeded up the aisle and blessed everybody’s candy cane. He told them all to go out and be a blessing during the week, giving their candy canes away to anybody that they thought might need to feel better. They were to bless somebody with one of their gifts that had been blessed.

It seems to me that Emmanuel Church, Alexandria, knows how to celebrate Christmas.

When I was interim priest at Church of the Advent in St. Louis we celebrated two full Advent seasons together, and sure enough, those Adventers leaned into Advent. They took their namesake season seriously, and personally, like it was a crucial part of who they are. My friends at Church of the Transfiguration in Lake St. Louis tell me that that congregation is thoughtfully and actively working to transfigure their faith and their neighborhood. Turns out, some church people work hard at being what they are named. They get practical and concrete about aligning their community life with their community’s name. I sort of hate to say it this way, but it gets the point across: some congregations are really intentional and missional about their brand.

We are all members of the Body of Christ, but we are spread out and congregated in separate parishes. Some parishes have their own name, so they are fortunate to have a doorway into their own identity, the possibility of taking on an authentic “congregational personality” that inspires and

energizes their worship and ministry in the world. Sometimes worship and mission becomes who a congregation is, and when that happens it's pretty good.

How does it happen? How do some churches become who and what they call themselves? How do we inhabit our identity and then enact that identity in Christian care for our neighbors? We do it by being purposeful. We talk about identity integrity, and then work at it. We commit time and resources to realizing it. But that's not all. Smart, diligent effort is not the whole story. It never is. It's necessary but it's not sufficient. Something more is needed, and the "more" in this case is the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. Real and effective identity integrity in a congregation is divine work. It is nothing less than the Body of Christ being Christ himself, fully human but also fully divine.

Followers of Jesus can become local, authentic incarnations of the Body of Christ because of Christmas, because the Word was made flesh and has dwelt among us. Because He shined in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome Him. We have seen his glory. We have received his fullness, grace upon grace. Grace and truth came through him." That's how.

It's possible because of today's gospel lesson, that wonderful poem from the first chapter of John. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He is the light and life of all humanity. He came into his own world as Emmanuel, God with us. And his coming means, among other things, that we can be who we are, the Body of Christ in this place at this time and with this name, for the life of the world. Imagine a host of local congregations, each one expressing the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Body of Christ uniquely, through its gifted members and their particular ministries in their neighborhood. Imagine members of each of those congregations embracing and exploring their own local identity, and doing so that they might more fully obey the Risen Christ's command to love their God and love their neighbor.

And finally, to get to where some of you have already arrived I'm sure, what about Grace Church? What about us? Are we who we say we are? Are we being grace in a world that desperately needs it? Needs us? The answer is, "yes." In many ways we are being who we are, Grace Church. But we can do more. We can offer more of ourself, and who are we? We're Grace. Did you hear all that about grace in John chapter one? Three times! "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we saw his glory, full of grace and truth." "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law was given through Moses; but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." That's our chapter. Are we living it? (1) Emmanuel, God With Us, is full of grace; full of us. Are we full of Him? (2) Grace upon grace is on offer, an unending supply. And third, (3) Law was given through Moses, but grace, us, comes through us, the Body of Christ.

It's all possible because of Christmas, because of Emmanuel, because the Word, the Light of the World, has come, and is now shining in and through us. Amen.