

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Our readings this evening from Isaiah and from Paul's letter to his co-worker Titus both end with a word which we don't usually associate with Christmas Eve, and that word is "zeal". Isaiah's passage, promising the coming of a Messiah, concludes with 'The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this', and in his letter, Paul writes about 'a people of Christ's own who are zealous for good deeds.' So, let's be clear: The Incarnation of Jesus doesn't just randomly take place, whether it was in Bethlehem in ages past, or in our hearts in our own real-time. Zeal is the driving force behind the coming of Christ, God's own zeal to redeem us, and our own zeal to become Christ-like ourselves. Zeal is enthusiastic, for sure, and focused on a vision. It is expressive by definition, and deeply committed to a cause. In this case, the case for Incarnation, both God and human beings, the Creator and the creatures, rely on each other's zeal for the effectiveness of the project. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts to show a great light to those who walk in darkness ought to be mirrored by the zealousness of those who renounce impiety and live lives which are godly. For the Incarnation is really about the full giving and receiving of grace, that precious and unmatched gift, which is neither random nor accidental. Christmas Eve happens because of zeal.

In our Gospel reading from Luke, God's zeal for this incredible project is demonstrated by the angels who so passionately proclaim the good news to the shepherds. And, oh what a demonstration it must have been! The coming of a messiah had been foretold by God's prophets for centuries; the Lord God wasn't going to be satisfied with yet another king or just another tribal leader. The zeal of God the Father was to insert his own Son into the world, that grace might be known in tangible form, no longer just a theological concept, but a living, breathing manifestation. An incarnation of flesh and blood. Grace, God's unconditional love, would walk and talk and live and die in ways so familiar, so family-like, that it could no longer be denied. Grace would be visible, and audible, and show its love in deliberate acts of teaching and kindness and inclusion. This is the venture for which God was so zealous in those days. And we believe that God continues to be zealous, even in our own generation, for grace to be seen and heard on this earth. Today, that incarnation occurs when we represent the Body of Christ ourselves. Grace takes on flesh and walks the earth when we ourselves are zealous for good deeds. Grace is the gift we celebrate on Christmas, one which God has given and which we are called to pass along.

When I was in grade school and through Junior High, my best friend was a kid down the street named 'Jeff'. Jeff moved to the left coast when we were in high school, but we're still friends...we see each other at least once a year at the national license plate meet, but that's another story. During those years when we were kids, on Christmas morning each year, at about 9 o'clock in the morning, one of us would call the other to announce what we got for Christmas. Y'know: "I got a new bike!" "Oh, yeah, well I got a new chemistry set!" "That's nothing, I got a new iguana!" Now, we were church-going kids, but I don't remember that we ever said "I got a Savior in my stocking, I got a Savior! Did you get one too?" But, of course, that's what Christmas is all about: The giving and receiving of God's gift. A gift given with love and zeal; a gift we can't say we

deserve, but one in which we take great joy. A gift of grace, a gift we need, a gift intended to help us find fulfillment and reconciliation. The gift of a benefactor who, having made us, desires to love and keep us always. A gift which is intimately personal to each one of us, and yet is paradoxically shared by those of every language, tribe, and nation. A chemistry set with which we can concoct a new recipe or formula for relationships based on the elements of God's great precepts. A teaching gift; a healing gift. The great gift of God's Christ.

And, dear friends, I do indeed see zeal in our parish. As Kathie C. shows a quilt miniature she has been working on, I feel the zeal she knows in that project, especially if she is creating it as a gift. And Zachary's violin playing is a product of practice, for sure, but also a demonstration of zeal for that venture, and for the opportunity to share it as a gift to his family and friends. And Megan's musical skills, too; even before she performs, when she is yet practicing and learning, her zeal for accomplishing and sharing are obviously evident. And David Meeker's thirty-six years serving this community has been the work of a zealous person, a man who knew the zeal of his calling, one in whom the Incarnation of God's grace has been shared for us all to experience. And Laura Bennett's zeal for helping the children of North Broad Elementary, and all children, really. And this evening we can't forget the Maiden Mary, whose zeal for bearing the Christ Child, the incarnation of Grace, into the world, was deterred by neither the hardships of social convention, the bleak midwinter, nor even the inconvenient stable. There is passionate zeal all around us, if you just look for it, recognize it, and appreciate it. There is, no doubt, some there in your own hearts.

And I pray that you will heed its call to share God's grace, and that you will find that God's passions are just waiting for your's, that together you may unleash powerful, loving miracles of your own. That, I think, is the way Christ's incarnation is best celebrated and continued. So, if your 'phone rings at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning, it might be me, proclaiming that "I got a savior for Christmas!", but if it doesn't, may it ring in your heart and mind to remind you that you are loved, and that others need your love desperately for fulfillment and reconciliation. Gregory on Nyssa, in the fourth century, praised God's great incarnational Christmas gift in this way: "O inexpressible mystery and unheard paradox: The Invisible is seen, the Intangible is touched, the eternal Word becomes accessible to our speech, the Timeless steps into time, the Son of God becomes the Son of Man!" For what has been, thanks be to God. For what is this day, thanks be to God. And for what will be, thanks be to God! Amen.