2011 Christmas Message from the Bishop

One of my favorite parts of Christmas anticipation is the traditional service of Lessons and Carols done on the fourth Sunday in Advent. This beautiful service tells through hymns, carols, anthems, prayer and Scripture readings the story of the coming of the Messiah.

By tradition, the service begins with the hymn “Once in Royal David’s City.”¹ With the congregation gathered in silence, a solo unaccompanied voice sings the first verse: “Once in Royal David’s city stood lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her Baby in a manger for His bed. Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little Child.”

But lest we lose ourselves in the sentimentality of the poetic image and the traditions associated with our Christmas celebrations, we should also remember that the Gospel story is rooted in the reality of a broken humanity’s need for redemption. Part of the Christmas story is rooted in the rough tragedy of life and failure throughout human history from Grandfather Adam and Grandmother Eve’s disastrous experiment in the Garden of Eden.

We surely don’t have to look far either in our own day or in the times around the birth of Jesus in order to find the theme of human failure in the Christmas story itself. As one writer describes it: The Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus are set within a context of massive failure: “Israel had failed as a nation, burdened by effete religiosity and corrupt leaders. As Joseph and Mary made their way to Bethlehem, centuries of failure went with them – cycles of sin and redemption, exile and restoration, cruelty and mercy, a people who never fulfilled their calling, a royal family undone by hubris, a religion grown stale and picayune, a people still ‘walking in darkness’ after all these years. No one would be saved hosting lavish religious festivals, or by a ruling class looking out only for itself or by a legalistic system run by the small-minded. (Can you hear our situation today?) The Infancy Narrative demands that we learn from our failures, grasp God's determination, and make a here-and-now decision to press on beyond comfort and competency into a land of risk and danger.”²

We do need to press on as our Baptismal Covenant³ calls us: to resist evil, to feed the hungry, eradicate oppression and preserve human dignity. We need to be careful here lest we begin to believe that we can correct or redeem all human failure through our own efforts or through our determination to rid the world of all that oppresses and hurts in human life. The infection of sin runs too deeply in our human nature to be eradicated through our own determination. Nothing we can do, neither human effort nor the strength of human will, can do away with our human addiction to seeking power and exercising control over others, measuring human worth in dollar bills, exploited one another for personal gain, denying dignity to our neighbor.

There is a cure, however, to our sinfulness. And the cure is revealed in stanza 5 of “Once in Royal David’s City: “And our eyes at last shall see Him, through his own redeeming love.” It is only God’s ocean-deep love that knows no limits love that can save us from our human madness. The only cure is a divine mystery too deep for us to even begin to grasp: That in spite of all the hurt and failure of human life, God sees us only through the eyes of divine love as expressed in the sending of God's only Son in order to redeem we who least deserve it.

That is God’s Good News in Christmas! It is that deep, abiding, unswerving love of God that is the foundation of the Christmas story that brings joy and hope to the darkness of the world. And in this blessed season, we can be merry! For that is the way the world can be, in God.

¹ Hymn 102, The Hymnal 1982
² The Rev. Tom Erich in his blog, Daily Walk, December 20, 2011
³ The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 304-305