

Christmas Eve, 10:30 p.m. Homily
St. James the Less Episcopal Church
The Rev. David T. Anderson

A True Story of Christmas Day.

It was 1945. Christmas approaching. He and his men landed in Seattle after being in the South Pacific for 3 years. Three years of war. Three years of being away from his dearly beloved wife. Three years since he had kissed his only child, his son, a baby, good-bye.

He was a railroad man anyway, in peace and then in war. He knew that all the boys were entering the states faster than the army could get them home; he knew that there just weren't enough locomotives to get everyone where they needed to be. That was all the way across the country. He called his wife, and told her there was no need to be at Fort Meade outside of Washington, D.C. anytime soon, because there was no telling when he would get there. His first order of business was to get his men where they needed to be; his own needs came only afterwards.

Somehow he got his men to Harrisburg, Penn. It was the day of Christmas Eve. There were no trains left, and they told him to settle his men in for the night. He asked to see the list of supervisors of the train station. He looked down the page and saw a familiar name; he was the maintenance supervisor, a man he and his wife knew. In fact, his wife and he had gone out with them socially. He called him up. The supervisor came to the station, unhooked a locomotive from a freight train, connected passenger cars to it, and off the troops went into the night to Fort Meade.

When the train pulled into Fort Meade it was pitch black dark. Everything was silent; closed; dead; frozen in the mid-winter cold and dark. The man found a phone and called the Officer of the Day: "We're here." The officer's response was no one expected them; the best he could do was to bed the men in the station; then they would get them on their way to Washington or wherever they needed to get to their families in the morning. The man replied: "These men have been in the war for three years. They are not going to wait around just to let people sleep. If you are not going to do anything, get me your commanding officer on the phone right now."

Within 30 minutes, the lights came on at the station. Trucks pulled up. The men were loaded. They were all, each and every one on their way. Home.

It was very, very late. Maybe it was around 4 o'clock in the morning by then. Mr. Rice asked for a van, so he could be taken to the officer's quarters. When they pulled up, he saw parked there that was a Chevrolet exactly like the one he had. It reminded him even more how much he wanted to be with those he loved. He walked closer to it; he saw it even had a dent in the same place his did. "That's my car!" went off in his mind like a fire alarm. He went into the building. The hallway was long, in both directions, to his right and his left. It was dark, and there were many, many doors to the rooms. He called out her name, "Jacqueline." Before he could finish saying it a second time his wife stepped out of a room down the hall; the light from the room spilled out into the hallway illuminating her like a spotlight, no, like a heavenly light. She was still dressed in her clothes as if she knew he would come.

They hugged forever. He did not ever want to let go, and neither did she.

Finally the embrace loosened and he looked through the doorway into the room, and there was this big boy his mother had to raise all by herself for three years and who said: "You're my Daddy!"

The love of that hallway is beyond words; it is also from beyond human creation. Those hugs and tears were a vision for me of a manger for God's love poured into a torn and tired, war-weary world. It was a vision Tom Rice shared with me as he, in his 90's, lay in a hospital bed that would soon receive his death. I beheld it as a love beyond merely our human heart's capacity it is the love of God whose light shines upon us and through us, and the darkness does not overcome it.

For God's love for us is even greater than in the love of man for his wife and a wife for her husband when it is at its best; it is even greater than a father for his son, but it is close to both.

Tonight we speak of the love of a Father, and of a Son, and of a holy family long ago and far away. Yet it is the same love that greeted/greets us in our baptism, often as an infant; it is the same love that surrounds us in the sacred moments of our dying, and carries us all the way even through the gates of

death. You and I may know this love in so many ways, so many moments of our lives.

Some of those moments/experiences are easy to think, yes, God is with us. We sense it in sunsets, cold starry nights, through music or art or poetry or literature. In ocean smells or flowers fragrance, in loving embraces of family, friends; in the intimacies of lover's looks; in the quiet of a space of worship and prayer. These carry intimations of the Love we adore this night. And so we settle our minds and calm our fears and push down distractions, to here, now open our very hearts and make God's presence with us our sole object of desire. This is all God needs, to be with us this Christmas.

But we need not sentimentalize this love with only glamorous, dramatic moments and experiences. The Love of God upon the world, ourselves included, is announced this night to be where and how we do not expect it.

God is with us in all the scenes and events of our lives, in every step of the way.

While Mary beheld her son this night when we celebrate his birth, we also know too that Mary beheld her son on the cross, and indeed it was there that even greater love became revealed, in the struggle and pain.

The fact is that all joy in our human experience is mixed. There is, and never was, and will not be this year either, the "perfect" Christmas for any of us. Sorrow is present for some; yearning for some. For some loneliness, and some disappointment colors it all. Alcoholism, depression, anxiety abound among us. Lack of forgiveness sits in the room with some of us.

Here is what the truth of the Christian proclamation of Incarnation means: it is in the flesh and blood realities of our lives that God shows up.

In the very homes and communities we live in,
in the circumstances of our lives in this very time of our lives,
in the places we go, the people we are with, in the midst of the problems that beset us, the sorrow that shadows us, the difficulties that seek to define us, and the disappointments that shake us,
in the joys and reunions and half-way forgivenesses and tenuous communions we share.

All these are the stomping grounds of God. God lives in no lofty and lifted up towers, but rather in the smelly stables and ordinariness of our lives.

Tom Rice's Christmas spoke to me of the love of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Family in a way almost too movingly to bear. This love of a parent for child, and child for parent, no matter how "off" we can make it in our own experience, points, even when "right" so weakly of the love of God for you and me. We can understand the longing for reunion, the surprise of an unexpected gift, and the sheer joy of a loving embrace, and so the Son overwhelms us/me when he recognizes this great thing that has come.

While we never get it perfectly right, we do have blessed foretastes of it. Simply our yearning can be the very ground for our hope become God's hope, for our hearts and minds to behold what God is doing anew. It does not matter whether we get it right. What's important tonight is to acknowledge that God does get it totally right. That in this One Jesus is all we need to embrace, to adore, to bow before to be touched by that Love which created us, sustains and redeems us, and greets us into eternal life. O come, let us adore him.