



S T . J A M E S ' C H U R C H

865 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021 · 212-288-4100 · www.stjames.org

Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2006

Holy Eucharist Rite I, 10:30 p.m.

The Rev. Brenda G. Husson, Rector

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

It happened some months ago. At a conference for professional development. Many of the participants highly regarded, almost all of them very competent. But most of them a little overwhelmed and overwrought, a few underpaid and unappreciated. It was at that conference that one of the participants went to speak to a conference leader one-on-one about how to manage in this profession and maybe even thrive. They talked and he gave the participant some suggestions. Helpful ones. Ones that rang true. Then he gave the participant a rock.

He said as he handed it over, "Sometimes it just helps to have something to hold onto." When life seems uncertain and amorphous, something that you can actually feel and see and touch. "Sometimes it just helps to have something to hold onto."

You may have seen one of these rocks. They sell them in gift shops and catalogues and sometimes in airport bookstores. Rocks, no bigger and often smaller than a fifty-cent piece, sometimes polished and sometimes not. Each with a word carved into it. A word like faith or grace, hope or love. The rock he handed over said hope. It was highly polished.

Tonight, perhaps more than any other night in the year, comes highly polished. Burnished by our efforts or by our memories. The glow of candles, of lit trees and presents with bright ribbons. So, too, the central story for this night, the story of the emperor and the newborn child; the tale of a hard journey to Bethlehem and no room in the inn at journey's end; the image of a child delivered in a stable and cradled by straw.

As in our own lives when we need a certain something for it to truly feel like Christmas, so in the Christmas story itself most of us have one image that conjures the whole of it for us. And makes it shine. Perhaps it's the angels singing their *Gloria in excelsis* or the shepherds who are sore afraid. For others here it may be the imagined sight of cows and sheep gathered round the makeshift cradle, or the image, from a thousand paintings, of the

baby's mother cloaked in blue as she ponders all these things in her heart. These are the images we know and the images and memories we hold on to. Nothing wrong with that, for sometimes – usually -- it helps to have something to hold on to. As God, who knows us well, well knows.

And knew. Knew that a God who came to us only as Spirit would slip through our fingers. Knew that a God seen only as the author of creation would be too grand for us to grasp. God, who knowing us, came to us as a child, a child just like us who needed holding as a baby and, just as we do, grew up to live and work and walk in this world. Grew to be a man who let himself be touched, just as we are, by earth's sorrows and joys.

So we do well to hold those images of Jesus' birth – God born among us – and see there a child born with nothing. A child born with empty hands. Then see that child grown with his hands still empty so that he might touch all who are lost, or afraid, all who hunger and all who need his healing touch. See Jesus who comes into the world with empty hands and ends his life with arms stretched wide on a cross. Dying with empty hands and open arms that there might be room enough for the whole world to come within his saving embrace. See God, born in a manger and hung on a cross, who hold us in his love.

We hold this night in our hearts and souls. Shining candles and familiar stories that can seem far removed from the world we walk in during the bright light of day, a world of war and fear, terrible poverty and dizzying wealth. But hold this night fast with its candles and carols and the story of the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. For here we find the child, our God, born for this very world, to touch and hold and heal us and finally lift us up into new life.

Hold this night and let it recall you to the truth of hope and faith, love and grace. Because it helps to have something to hold onto. Something to remind us that we are held fast by God. Like the rock that I still carry in my pocket.

Amen.