

Can you feel it? There's something in the air tonight, as all our preparations come to an end and the celebration begins. I don't think it's just us, either. I think all of creation is on tiptoe with anticipation, tonight, when the division between heaven and earth is so thin you can almost see through it.

Tonight is the night we've been measuring time against - however many weeks of Advent - however many days till Christmas. Everything that happened yesterday is before Christ and everything that happens tomorrow is after him. Tonight we are living in the time of God's coming among us. His name is Emmanuel the God who is with us who is made out of the same stuff we are and who is made out of the same stuff God is and who will not let either of us go.

That is the main thing we are waiting for tonight - that baby's cry. But that's not the only thing, because most of us are waiting for more than one thing and those things are not all the same.

*For instance, I believe someone here is waiting to find out what is inside all those presents under the Christmas tree..*

*And someone else is looking forward to waking up in a house in which all the beds are full once again, with children and grandchildren who have come home for the holidays.*

*I know others of you for whom this is a hard time of the year. There is that empty chair to deal with, that stocking that stays folded in the box. All the rituals that were designed for two or more are now up to you alone and it is like the sound of one hand clapping. Christmas is the season when you wait to see if the hurt has let up any since this time last year and you want it to, so you can get on with your life and you don't want it to, because that might mean you have stopped caring.*

For good or ill, every Christmas Eve functions like a kind of time machine for us, taking us back to every other Christmas Eve we have spent on this earth.

For some, it is a reminder of the way life used to be, back when we were on the front row of the holiday show and not the stage managers of it. Christmas is the smell of pine boughs and oranges stuck with cloves, the taste of roast turkey and peppermint. It is mom and dad sitting around in their bathrobes sipping coffee while the kids chase the new puppy through a sea of wrapping paper.

For others, this night is a reminder of the way life should have been but never was-those who have looked all their lives through other people's windows at such scenes of domestic bliss, but always as a peeping tom and never as an insider.

Everyone is supposed to go home for Christmas, right? Only where is that, exactly? Some of us know and some of us are still trying to find out, but tonight the answer is, right here. This is our home tonight, and we are all inside. This is our Bethlehem, where we have hauled the hopes and fears of all our years to lay them in front of a manger.

No wonder the place is awash with excitement! It is full of all our Christmas dreams and memories, all our best wishes for ourselves and others, including our ideas about what our lives should be like once God has been born into them.

If you are not sure what your ideas are, you can generally find some clues by looking at the Christmas cards you sent this year. Or if you did not send any, then look at the ones you received that you like. What kinds of images are on them? What kinds of words? Unless you or your friends have really strange taste, chances are that "peace," "joy," and "love" are on a lot of them, along with pictures that embody those words. And if you are lucky, you actually got to walk around in some of those pictures this season. You got to experience some peace, some joy, some love maybe enough to wonder why you do not walk around in them more often.

However different our Christmases have been, one longing most people have in common this time of year is the longing for a calmer, purer, more centered life, and the way most people talk about that life usually has a lot of "up" words in it: as in "rising above anxiety," "keeping our heads above water," or "lifting our eyes up unto the hills," as if belonging to God were a matter of being transported to God's presence for as long as possible -- to a place like this one where everything is beautiful, and focused, and right. Just like a Christmas card...

But do you know what? Even the pictures on our Christmas cards are only moments in time. If we could see past the edges, we would probably see some pretty familiar sights. I have one card of a cozy little cabin snuggled in some snowy woods, with one set of tire tracks running up to the door but I'll bet in the lot next door -- in front of the single-wide house trailer roofed with a blue tarp -- there's a rusted out 1980 Dodge up on blocks in the front yard, several dead refrigerators, and a partially burned couch with the stuffing hanging out of it sitting out in the snow.

What I mean is, even the very best pictures of Emmanuel and his family, the ones where the artist has really focused in on the softness of the baby's skin, the warm bodies of the animals standing around him heating the air with their breath steaming - (some of whom might even have licked him if Joseph and Mary had not been standing in the way) -- even the best pictures do not tell the whole story: You know it by heart: how the whole town was clogged with travelers, none of whom was there by choice. The emperor waited them all counted and taxed and he could have cared less where they slept. That was their problem, not his. Still, you have to wonder what happened to Joseph's family. If Bethlehem was his hometown, then why didn't his own people take him in? I don't know, but they didn't. Joseph and Mary got a stall instead of a room, which was not as bad as we sometimes make it out to be, but still, not an ideal

situation, With luck, they also got a pitchfork and a wheelbarrow. We know they got a feed trough, because that was where they laid their treasure, and that's when the picture was taken right then, while the star was still overhead and the angels were still singing in the rafters.

But twenty minutes later: What? The hole in the heavens had closed up and the only music came from the bar at the inn. One of the cows stepped on a chicken and the resulting racket made the baby cry. As she leaned over to pick him up, Mary started crying too and when Joseph tried to comfort her she told him she wanted her mother. She said, if she had just married a nice boy from Nazareth, she would be back home where she belonged instead of competing with sheep for a place to sleep. Then she said she was sorry and Joseph said not to think another thing about it. And he meant it, too. They both were tired and cold and they hurt all over and there was nothing to eat, but you know what? *God was still there, right in the middle of the picture. Peace was there, and joy, and love not only in the best of times but also and especially in the worst of times because during those times, that's where God is: With us.*

It was Emmanuel, "God-With-Us". Not the "God-Up-There Somewhere" -- who answers our prayers by lifting us out of our lives. It was Emmanuel the God who comes to us in the midst of our lives however far from home we are, however less than ideal our circumstances, however much or little our lives reflect the Christmas cards we send. That is where God is born, just there: in any cradle we will offer him, on any pile of straw we will pat together with our hands.

Any of us who have prayed to be transported into God's presence this Christmas will get our wish -- only not, perhaps, in the way we had thought. None of heaven's escalators are going up tonight. Everybody up there is coming down tonight, right here, right into our own Bethlehem, bringing us the God who has decided to make his home in our arms: Jesus Christ, Our Lord. .

Amen.