

The Rev. Josh Stephens
Bruton Parish Church
Christmas 2018

It's wonderful to see all of you on this Christmas Eve night. You have traveled from near and far to make pilgrimage, we might say, to visit the Christ child. Some of us have heard rumors of Good News that a child has been born who will save us. Others already know this Jesus — God in-fleshed — and have come to worship him. We gather tonight, wrapped in a blanket of God's story and song, which will bring comfort to the loneliest of souls. And we pray — we pray that this Prince of Peace might end the warfare of our world beginning with the violence that exists inside each of us. *You have come to the right place. You've found him.* You've found him because heaven could not contain the love of God; because God came looking for me and for you.

I had cause to study the story of creation not long ago with our youth confirmation class. We read through the seven days of creation in Genesis 1. This origin poem says much about from whom we have come and about the world in which we live. In time before time, the Spirit of God hovers over the nothingness. The Word of God goes out and says, "Let there be light," so light pierces the darkness, and God says that it is good. Then God gets on a roll, speaking into being not only light but also land, not only land but also plants, not only plants but also animals, not only animals but even us. And God looks at the world thus created and says, as we used to say in the Florida beach-town of my childhood, "It's all good, bro!"

But in this Genesis story we find another truth which we know all too well: it is that humanity was disinterested in living in harmony with God and creation in the good world God has made. You can call this sin, or rebellion, or selfishness, but

chances are, if you are anything like me, then you know something of this lasting inter-generational and yet uniquely personal brokenness that leads to so much pain and hurt in the world. Even as we try to make it better and fight for good, we often end up creating more brokenness in the process. It's as if we cannot do it on our own.

The solutions for our personal pain and despair are many. We try more discipline, more medications, more therapy. We trust in political candidates, whatever the persuasion, to restore a nation which falters. We turn to drones and planes and the bombs they drop to try to exterminate violence and hatred. **All of that stands in contrast to Christmas:** God's solution for our waywardness is to come near. God responds to our isolating selfishness with a relationship. Rather than letting us remain *incarcerated* in prisons of our own making, God chooses *incarnation* and comes as one whose yoke is easy and burden is light. The creating Word became flesh to dwell among us. And the Word of God is on the move again this night. Re-creating. Restoring. Re-remembering us. Something new, something filled with love is in the air. God is reshaping us with those creative hands again.

A few weeks ago our Parish Life Coordinator, Christine, discreetly asked each Bruton clergyperson if we would like tickets to the Williamsburg Players' production of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. There were many nights to choose from so, after lining up the babysitter and coordinating with my wife's schedule, we picked a Thursday night performance. My wife and I thought, "This will be a nice date. We can get away from the usual suspects and do something together."

We get there and it took all of about thirty seconds before the first Bruton parishioner said hello! We look over at the doors and in walks Fr. Dan and his

wife, Kate. We walk into the theatre and there's my boss, Fr. Epperson, with his family. "Great!" I thought, "I'm sure we were all hoping to spend more time with each other with these long holiday hours." But the best was before the show. Apparently, the Williamsburg Players does a ticket give-away program each year and this time they wanted to acknowledge area clergy by giving them tickets. So before the play, they announce, "Will all clergy please stand up so we can thank you for your service." Dan and I, being the new priests we are, stand up with some false reluctance, "Oh, if you insist." Meanwhile, I look back at Chris and he is shrinking in his chair, pretending he isn't there.

You know the story of the play. Scrooge is visited by three Christmas spirits on his way to repentance. Before the first spirit arrives, the ghost of Scrooge's business partner, Jacob Marley, shows up. The great privilege and comforts of his life are proportionate to the weight of the chains he now carries. You can hear those chains dragging before Marley ever comes on stage and long after he departs.

Jacob Marley warns Ebenezer Scrooge of what has happened to him and what will occur this night. And Scrooge says to his old friend, "I don't understand! You were always a good friend to me. You worked hard. You ran a very successful business!" And Marley responds to Scrooge saying, "Humanity was my business."

Tonight we find ourselves sharing in the nativity of our Lord when God declared emphatically: "Humanity is my business."

I had the pleasure a few weeks back of doing a house blessing for a family of this parish. They had bought a house and were establishing a home of their own in a new way; they wanted God to make a home there, too. After supper, I took water and blessed it, and we walked through bedrooms and bathrooms and guest rooms

and living rooms, splashing holy water and saying prayers. Their two little boys were laughing as they showed me their rooms and water was flying everywhere. One of the boys could not get enough of the holy water. With each aspersion, he would try to jump in front of the flying water, giggling, saying, “More! Get my head this time! My toes! Get my toes! More! More! More!”

My friends, God has entered our world uniquely, becoming one of us in Christ Jesus, making a home here among us. God is saying to us: Humanity is my business! Can we but make a home for this Christ in our hearts, in our homes, in our lives, asking for more and more and more of this loving, creating, and blessing God?

There is a prayer which we hardly ever get to say because it's marked for the second Sunday after Christmas and the season only has twelve days. I think we should pray it tonight. Let us pray:

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*