*Grace, peace and mercy are yours from the incarnate God. Amen.*

With the words of Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth still echoing in this space,

this reading from John’s Gospel feels particularly jarring on Christmas morning. But this Gospel text is itself a birth narrative as well. It is the story of the birth of all of creation. It is the story of the birth of an entirely new thing, a God who loves creation so much that this God would literally take on human flesh and live among us. The Christmas story is NOT just the celebration of a birth of a baby. It is the story of our God who became human, incarnate literally means the putting on of flesh, in order to save us from ourselves, sin, and death. This is not a necessarily the warm and happy image that we want to associate with Christmas. This is not the stuff of Christmas carols or quaint nativity scenes. But we can’t have the joy of Christmas without reflecting upon the significance of what it means that God would take on flesh and live among us.

The Christmas story is not just pure sentimentality. I think that somehow along the way, we have lost sight of just how RADICAL the incarnation is. It is the story of God coming down to us, God living among us, with all the messiness that comes along with being fully human. God was born of the womb of an unwed teenage mother. In a shack, somewhere in Bethlehem. And this chain of events was set into motion by a God who loves us so much that this God would choose live among us, knowing that we would ultimately kill Him. The incarnation forever changes God’s relationship to humanity and humanity’s relationship to God. The incarnation means that we can see, hear, and know God in ways never before possible. It is the moment when the Holy and the Ordinary collide and God breaks into our world. And none of us will ever be the same again. But by living among us, it also means that God suffers, that God knows pain, and even that God can die.

When we read this Gospel text from John in light of the events of Holy Week and Easter, not only Christmas morning, the vulnerability of God coming to us as an infant takes on a whole new meaning. The story of the incarnation is that Christ not only LIVED among us, but that he would die as well, and go on to live again. To become flesh is to know joy, pain, suffering, and loss. It is to love, to grieve, and someday, to die.

I struggle with the heart of this text, and perhaps you do too. Our world is so painful at times, that wouldn’t it be great to just set all of that aside for one day and just focus on the joy of Christmas…the birth of an innocent baby. But our lives with all their grief and stress and pain keep marching on, regardless of the day on the calendar.

I think the real hope in Christmas is in knowing that Christ dwells in all the mess of what it is to be human. For all the people for whom Christmas is not joyful and family togetherness is non-existent, Christ was born for this. For all the young adults that went away to college and are returning home for the first time, to realize they no longer belong in their own lives, Christ was born for this. For all the people who are spending this holiday sober or without a beloved partner, Christ was born for this. For the children who are shuttled between their divorced parents on this day, Christ was born for this. For all the nations for whom peace on earth seems impossible, Christ was born for this too, and will continue to live there until swords are beaten into plowshares. Christ was born for this…Christ was born for this.

I don’t want a God who is far removed from me and only knows a sort of existence that is bright and shiny and happy. I want a God who is not afraid to sit next to my dying family member in a hospital bed. Or accompany me through dark nights of the soul when it seems like there is nothing but darkness ahead. Or who is not afraid to spend time with those who live on the margins of society, the homeless, the poor, and the drug addicts. This is what it means to say that God became flesh and lived among us. To acknowledge that God has lived the fullness of human experience, who knows the light but also the darkness.

I need to hear…we need to hear…about a God who brings light into the darkness of this world. Who is the light that dispels darkness of all the parts of our lives and our world that threaten to overcome us. As part of the training to become a pastor, all seminarians spend time working as chaplains, I worked in a hospital for a summer. One of my patients in the ICU was a man named Daniel. He was a middle-aged man, a former used car salesman, now homeless, an alcoholic and a drug addict, and in his last few weeks of life. He was what the hospital called an “unbefriended” patient. He had no family and no friends. I met him on the day that he was given a terminal diagnosis and regularly visited him until his death. Daniel was living in darkness. He never wanted the shades open or the lights on and he was afraid of dying. Although Daniel went to church as a child, he told me that he was pretty sure that God didn’t want anything to do with people like him. He asked me what I thought, and I said that I was pretty sure that God was right there in the ICU with us, in that dark room, amid the sounds of the hospital. He had no reason to believe that this was true, except that we were two people speaking honestly about God in a place where only life and death matters. I will never forget how Daniel’s face visibly relaxed then, it was as if light had come into his world. God was not far away, God was right there. Daniel died a couple days later, on a sunny Monday afternoon with me and a nurse at his bedside. According to John, it is the light of Christ that shines in the darkness, as it did for Daniel, so it does for us.

Christ as Light of the World is a beacon of light in interminable darkness of a broken world. And as the cry of the newborn Christ shattered the quiet of the night, so too was the distance between God and God’s people broken forever. This is the good news of the incarnation. Thanks be to God.