

It is a cold day. You are outside longer than you would like. Though you have carefully selected all the right clothes to wear, your hands and feet are numb to the touch. You are so cold you can no longer feel your face. You stand with people who make you laugh. Together you talk about how cold it is. Somewhere appears from nowhere and brings you and your friends a tray of hot, vegetable soup in porcelain mugs. There are also plates of freshly made ham sandwiches. Though you can barely feel the mug, you gratefully take the gift. You cup your hands around the mug of soup. With your other hand, you locate a sandwich half. You take a bite of the sandwich. You put the mug of hot soup to your lips. As you blow, you look up and see the others standing in the circle. Very slowly, the hot, homemade, vegetable soup goes down your throat. The warm feeling begins to change the way you feel. You feel alive again and you laugh.

In another time, you are a child again. You are sitting with friends in someone's backyard. On this day, it is neither hot nor cold; the weather now is unimportant. You are bored. You and your friends have played all the games you and your friends play. You sit there staring into the trees and into the clouds. Do you know the feeling of boredom? Someone asks, "What can we do?" Your sister says, "I've got an idea. Why don't we clean up that old vacant lot and turn it into a playground. If we could get rid of those old tires and the trash and the weeds, maybe someone would donate something and help us!!" The idea catches hold and you and your friends go off and clean up the vacant lot and it is a neighborhood playground to this day! It is all because someone shares an idea. "I've got an idea."

There were people who once said religion is law. Laws help us understand how to behave. Laws keep us in the channel, keep us from straying one way or another. Law help us know right from wrong.

Others have said, "No, religion is a covenant, an agreement that God makes with us. God offers this covenant so we can survive. If we remember the covenant, we will be OK. We will live.

Someone else says, "Religion is a person who shows us what living the covenant and obeying the laws looks like. If we follow the person and listen, we can learn something about life and living.

This morning, we remember the glory and richness of Christmas Eve and we wonder about its meaning.

Shirley Guthrie, professor of theology at Columbia Seminary, years ago wrote, "Christmas is the story of a radical invasion of God into the kind of real world where we live all year long—a world where there is political unrest and injustice, poverty, hatred, jealousy and both the fear and the longing that things would be different." (p.229, Guthrie, Shirley, Christian Doctrine, CLC Press, Richmond, Virginia, 1968.)

Christian faith is a dry, misunderstood religion until we discover someone who embodies the faith, who personifies the life of God for us, who wears faith like well-fitting Christmas gifts.

What was Christmas Eve? It was an invasion by God into our world!

God was in the world, The world came into being through God, but the world did not know God.

The Christmas child grew to be a man and his own people did not know who he was.

But to people who received him, who believed in him, he gave the power to be God's children.

God's word became flesh and lived right here. This is the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Grace is unlimited, unconditional kindness. Truth is an explanation about the way things are. Grace without truth can be sloppy and undisciplined. It can be too much of a good thing. On the other hand, truth without grace is

severe and cold and exact and unfeeling. Grace and truth together are amazing. Grace and truth together motivate and inspire.

We see it when Jesus challenges a Pharisee named Nicodemus and teaches him about God's love for the world. We see it when a woman is caught in the act of adultery. We do not know where the man is. They catch the woman and take her to Jesus. He says, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Grace and truth.

We see grace and truth when we join others and really love a neighbor, really do something that helps her, makes a difference in her life. We see grace and truth. We see it when we forgive someone.

We see it when we hear the testimony of John or the testimony of a person about to die who says, "I am grateful for what my Sunday school teachers taught me years ago. I am grateful for their stories and the hymns and the faith they gave me. God has been so good to me." Grace and truth.

Today we worship this amazing incarnate God who has come in the flesh.

The incarnate God comes to us like warm homemade soup bringing us back to life on a cold day.

The incarnate God is like an idea that moves a backyard of bored children.

The incarnate God is a person full of God's covenant and law and he shows us how to remember and to obey.

The incarnate God embodies the truth.

He personifies the God who loves us.

He wears faith like a Christmas suit.

He is full of grace and truth.

He is here among us and we have seen his glory.

Today we worship this incarnate God, the God who comes in the flesh.

This is where we begin.

**Loving God, open our eyes to the grace and truth all around us and in us because of Jesus Christ. Today we are grateful for the glory of Christmas Eve. We are grateful for the glory of carols and a babe in a manger and for candlelight and communion. Enable us, Lord, to appreciate this invasion into our world. Invade us again with your presence. Invade us with your hope and joy and peace and love. We pray today for a world that is stung by violence and poverty and greed and hunger. Let us be a people who take seriously your call to witness what we have seen and heard. We pray now as Christ has taught us, "Our Father who art in heaven..."**