**Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2012, The Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

Christmas time is a major time for new movies to be released. Nowadays, the movies that are the big box office hits tend to be those like the Twilight saga, the Hobbit, and anything to do with superheroes. These movies have one thing in common: they are set in make-believe worlds: fantasy. Fantasy is defined as "**the activity of imagining things that are impossible or improbable."** Fantasy books & videogames are also dominating consumer markets right now. Yes, fantasy is popular. For a few hours, they remove us from the reality of our everyday lives. They are about places where people can do amazingly magical, or superhuman things. Why is this fantasy genre is so incredibly popular now? The answer is clear: we need to escape from our dark lives. Our lives are difficult, full of constraints and problems. Why, just looking at the events of the last couple of weeks, with the fiscal cliff and the school shooting, things are tough! And at the personal level, I am sure that most of us gathered here have not been able to give all the gifts we would because of financial constraints. And that hurts. But in the fantasy world, for a short time, we don't have to face the problems we have every day. In the fantasy world we feel powerful and in control, we feel adventurous yet safe. On the Internet, I found relevant quotes, like this one: "**The fantasy world is way better than the real world**." We live in the real world.

Our Scripture readings began with an amazing reading from Isaiah, a man who lived in this real world around 800 B.C., who was a prophet -which means that God spoke to him as a messenger for the people. Isaiah's word's predicts the birth of Jesus!***"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...on them light has shined ...For a child has been born for us...authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God...Prince of Peace."*** **We** are the people who walk in darkness. The coloration of fantasy movies is dark - this connects to where people live - in despair or frustration, pain or anger. But here, in the real world, into this darkness breaks through "***a great light***:" Jesus, ***Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace."***.

Imagine you are there, back that night, in that humble stable with cows mooing and sheep baaing. You sense that this is not an ordinary scene, but you aren't sure what makes it unusual. You approach the manger which the others are looking at, and see that inside of it, instead of it being full of animal feed, is a cooing baby. You approach and see little hands reaching out. You get a sense that what is unusual is what is in that manger -- and you are drawn to it. In fact, you sense you should reach into the manger to the baby's reaching. And, so you do just that. You put your hand out and the baby wraps His hand around your's. Something otherworldly happens to you with the touch of this child - you don't understand it at the time, but you know it is special - because you are flooded with incredible warmth.

Today is the feast day of the Incarnation. "Incarnation" means that God took on human form in Jesus Christ: God made man. So often when people think about God, they think of the image of God the Father on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome: the almighty, powerful, transcendent God with the long grey beard: the creator who judges the world. If this is our view of God, we live our lives pretty independent of God -- because we think of Him as remote, uninterested in your life -- and certainly not helpful to your daily challenges! But this baby in the manger who is holding onto your finger, in an instant, teaches you something profoundly different. The master mind behind the universe did **not** stay remote, unknowable, far away from the suffering of earth, away from the messiness of our lives. God has come for you, that you might know Him through Jesus, that you might experience freedom through Him, and receive His love every day. God the Creator took on flesh, and became one of us, taking our burdens upon Himself that we might have life.  The heart of our Christmas celebration is that God broke into our world of sin and sorrow to save us. In the midst of our darkness, Jesus comes bringing life and defeating death. This is not fantasy, it is real.

I have two sons, one of them is here tonight. When they were young, they liked to play outside in the dirt and mud. We lived in a house where it was a ways from the doors to the bathroom, where they could wash up. How could I get them to the bathroom without messing up the house? I wanted to clean them up before they came in the door --but that was not possible. God welcomes us in right at the door, dirt and all. Our problems don't need to be fixed before we come to Him; Jesus is in the fixing business. He says come to me with your dirt, I will refresh you and give you life.

In a few minutes, we will have the opportunity to confess our sins and receive Holy Communion. In Holy Communion, we will reach out to receive - and when we do, the real presence of the living God, of Jesus Christ, will be placed into our hands. And, when you take it in, Christ's Light will penetrate the darkness in your life. Here, you have come to partake of a feast at the best restaurant of all, where you don't need to pay lots of money to eat-- for this rich food is free. And, you don't have to get dressed up. And, you won't experience heartburn afterwards. The rich food here is about the riches of God's free gift of grace that lasts eternally.

St. Paul said in today's Epistle, "***The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all....our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...He it is who gave Himself for us that He might redeem us."*** Jesus Christ is real and not fantasy, and Jesus brought with Him a better life for you, full of hope and love. Hope from Jesus Christ, those little fingers gripping your hand, is real; it is grounded in the harsh realities of our lives. Oh, the suffering and pain that are part of life will not go away, but you don't need to escape because Jesus is there with you through it all, and as a result you will know without a shadow of a doubt that all will be well. The message of Christianity is much more than just preachy morality -- the message of Christ Jesus is a message of freedom that transforms and liberates us from what binds us. You came here tonight with your burdens (*maybe thinking you would rather be escaping at a fantasy movie*) but because of God's actions in the Incarnation and the resurrection you will leave full of the Light of Christ, which continues eternally in your life if you accept Him. Will you allow Jesus, who is real and here for you today, to be born within you and begin your life anew? I pray that you will. Merry Christmas! Amen.