**Christmas Day, Dec. 25, 2013, The Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

**Merry Christmas everyone! What does it mean to say, "Merry Christmas" to someone? It turns out that in other countries, they say "Happy Christmas!" Felix Navidad means "happy Christmas" and in England they say "happy " instead of "merry." Regardless of whether you say merry or happy, this is a significant and wonderful greeting . It is much more than our usual greetings of "hello" or "what's happening" or "nice to see you" or " howdy" or "what's up" or, "have a happy day." It is, of course, wonderful to wish someone a happy day. We all want to be happy, and have others be happy too.**

**In the field of psychology there is a big study called "the happiness project."** The project, which began in 1938, has followed 268 men for 75 years, measuring an astonishing range of traits—from personality type to IQ to drinking habits to family relationships—in an effort to determine what factors contribute most strongly to human happiness. The leader of the project, Dr. Vaillant, said recently: “The seventy-five years and twenty million dollars expended on the Grant Study points … to a straightforward five-word conclusion: ‘Happiness is love. Full stop.’ ” **How very interesting, because "God is love" (1 John 4:8). So, happiness is all about our relationship with God!**

**When we say "Merry Christmas" to someone we are wishing someone happiness through Jesus, our Savior, born this day. This two word greeting is loaded with an important message for those we say it too. This past week, I have said "Merry Christmas" to many people, at the post office, at the grocery store, in restaurants, as well as here at Church. And,** I realize that some people I have been saying "Merry Christmas" to have not been introduced to the Lord, they do not know that the birth of Christ happened to save them, and they do not know of His love for them. **To wish someone happiness because of the birth of the Messiah is a life changing greeting, if we are able to share the Good News of Jesus with the person we are greeting.**

**This morning, our 2nd reading from Paul's letter to Titus captures the true depth and breadth of our Happy Christmas greeting to each other. Here is the passage** again, ***"When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."*** This passage captures the Good News of Christmas!: that the birth of Christ happened to save us.

This Epistle is from the short letter of instructions Paul wrote to Titus, early in Titus' ministry in Crete. Titus became bishop of Crete. History shows that Titus died in the year 107, aged about 95. The passage we read today is from the end of the book of Titus. In the two chapters that precede our reading, Paul describes what life is like without Christ - because many people in Crete are exhibiting behaviors consistent with those who do not know the Lord: deception, corruption, dishonesty, slander, lack of self control. They needed to be rescued from themselves! Paul over and over again gives the answer: Jesus Christ, the Savior. None of us can save ourselves from the mess of living our lives our way. God took the initiative, by sending Jesus, to save us - with no strings attached. We don't earn our salvation; it is free for the taking: "***according to his mercy....it has been poured on us richly***."

We all want to be happy and we all need Jesus, but our recognizing and admitting that we need Jesus to rescue us is not a small thing in our culture. We are in a day and age when admitting that we need God's saving grace, is seen as weak. Merry Christmas is more than a superficial greeting, because Jesus' arrival on earth is more than superficial happiness: it is challenging to follow up. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who stood up to Hitler and was executed at the end of the war because of his faith, put it this way: "***Christ's coming was not merely a matter of glad tidings, but first of all, frightening news for everyone who has a conscience***."

Christmas is a time when we think about the Light of Christ. Isaiah said in chapter 9, "***the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light....on them light has shined.***" The people Paul speaks about who need Jesus are walking in darkness, and we are walking in darkness when we try to go it alone. Today, in our Gospel we heard, ***"...an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified."***  Indeed, God's Light is challenging and some fear letting Jesus into their hearts because of the challenge it might present to them. God's light is bright, and it reveals. It causes us to see how we fall short and where we need to improve. It causes us to see that we need rescuing, because we can't get through life on our own. But, the Light of Christ does not just reveal, it does not just end there -- that is just the beginning, for it is restorative, it is The Light of rescue. Bonhoeffer wrote from his cell, **“God loves human beings. God loves the world. Not an ideal human, but human beings as they are; not an ideal world, but the real world. ...unfathomable love.**” God knows us through and through already, God knows our weaknesses anyway, we have nothing to hide from Him.

Today's Gospel said, "***Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord***." The arrival of the Messiah this day brings rebirth and renewal and hope to you. Receive the love that God offers. God's love is mystical, enduring, present here today in the Word, the Sacrament, and in each other. Embrace God's love as you wish yourself a Merry Christmas today! Amen.