

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace...

It's incredible how different things look when you are looking back at them. I can remember moving to the West Coast 25 years ago, really feeling like an alien. Everything was so different, the trees, the landscape, the highways, the homes people lived in. Now, as I look back upon that journey to a foreign land, I realize it wasn't just the place that was strange, it was how I looked at things, with much to learn.

I look back now at what seemed to be individual pieces and events in my life, and now things look different then they did before. There are patterns and trends that I see happening, and now a more complete picture emerges. Things that seemed so important before don't mean much to me now, and other things that once seemed insignificant, now mean a great deal. Its interesting how hindsight works.

Take, for instance, the pastor who supervised me as an intern. He seemed old...I didn't think he was too much of a scholar or preacher, but I knew that he always spoke from the heart, and meant what he said. Now as I read his Christmas card, and hear of his second retirement 16 years after the first one...I see him in a whole different light. He will always live on in my memory as a pastor who lived the gospel and was filled with grace.

Hindsight is often important when we are reading scripture. Today's gospel is a good example. Perspective is very important. At first glance the story is a bewildering one: An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, 'Pack up the family and flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to come back. Herod seeks to kill this child.' So Joseph gets up in the night, and they leave for Egypt. I have to tell you, on a first reading this passage doesn't make much sense. Let's use a little 'hindsight'. Think of another Joseph, hundreds of years before, who was suddenly taken away to Egypt, he had dreams also, and they told him what to do. He did what the Lord intended, and as he was reunited with his family, who he literally saved from starvation, what does he say? "You meant this for evil, but God used it for good." Here is another Joseph who bundles up his family in the middle of the night and heads for the desert...the angel has warned of a terrible ordeal (the murder of children). Can it be that the Lord can use the evil intent of a king to bring about good? SURE. God has done it before, and God can do it again. It is no accident that Matthew says again and again, "In order to fulfil scripture...". That is our signal to use hindsight when we listen to the story of God at work. Hindsight tells us, "God is with us, and God is at it again, saving God's people with a might arm and an outstretched hand."

At the same time, Matthew calls us not only to look back, but to turn our face to the future, Jesus' future. We are called to remember the journey that awaits him. This Babe of Bethlehem has a long way to travel, by way of Jerusalem, all the way to Calvary. This journey takes him right into and through death itself, to a new life of resurrection which he

shares with us. Emmanuel will become "Lo, I am with you always.."

It's New Year's Eve. Today is a sort of rest stop on our journey through life. Before we get up from the bench at this crossroads and walk into 1996, I suggest that we use this time to put the past year in perspective, using our hindsight.

For some of us, we might be thankful for the end of a painful year, and we can't wait to turn the calendar over and make a new start. Or maybe it is difficult to let go of yesterday, so we dread the changes that a new year will bring. Maybe we feel a bit lost and confused by the new territory that lies ahead, which looks and feels like a foreign land. I know this year will bring big changes for some of you....you are aware of it already. Others of us wonder what surprises lie ahead...and we know that surprises are not always pleasant. We include hindsight in our reflection this New Year's Eve. We can benefit by taking time to look at God's fingerprints in the events of the past year. We give thanks to God for being Emmanuel, 'God with us'. We have known God's help and blessing in many moments of 1995. Jesus has come into this world with all its problems and tyrants and political disasters....because this is where we are...the people he loves.

In the second lesson Paul says that Jesus was born under the law in order to redeem us, who are adopted as children of God. We see God's involvement in this world not only 3,000 years ago in Egypt or 2,000 years ago in the lives of the holy family, but today in our lives as we struggle with taxes and politics and family struggles and work. Scripture doesn't just wish us good luck for a new year, it tells us of a savior who goes with us through each day of life.

Christmas is about much more than a baby in a stable. It is about being found by God. God has chosen to be with us, wherever we are, whatever we have done; and in God's good time we will be fully restored to our lost home. We will climb back into the lap of the One who loves us, and be held, embraced and fed.

I wish you God's blessings in the New Year...but more than that, I wish for you to remember God is near...Emmanuel...God with us. That is the greatest gift of all. A few Christmases ago there was a beautiful little girl in the hospital at Vanderbilt University. She came from a very wealthy family, and her family showered her with gifts. There were great overstuffed toys, giraffes over six feet tall, dolls, a huge victorian dollhouse, and games of every description. The mother, who was well known in East Coast society, brought another gift each time she came. She never stayed long when she came, for she was always on the way to some luncheon or party. The nurses were amazed at all the gifts, but began to complain because it was difficult to do their work around all the things which filled the room. One day the girl was particularly unhappy in the midst of all the gifts, and held on desperately to her mother, who was trying to hurry away to another meeting. The mother tried to distract her with the

new toy she had brought. The little girl cried, "Mommy, I just want you." For her, the most important gift of all was her mother's presence. That's the most important thing for us, too. As we wonder what 1996 will bring, we already know that we have the greatest gift of all....a savior who has come into this world...who has known its joys and its pain...and who has promised, "Lo, I am with you always.....", our Lord Emmanuel.

+the peace of God.....