

WGUMC Christmas Eve 2016

Muslims and Jews follow a lunar calendar, so their holidays move around a lot. But last year the birthday of Mohammed fell on Christmas Eve. And this year, the first night of Hanukkah falls on Christmas Eve for the first time in 111 years. For the children of Abraham, that's a remarkable convergence. So I've asked my husband, Hank, to tell the story of Hanukkah, light the Menorah and say the blessing in Hebrew. Then I'll tell you why.

[Here my husband Hank tells about the victory of the Maccabees and the re-consecration of the temple. He explains that for Jews, the temple was the dwelling place of God, where heaven touched earth.]

By the time the Gospels were written, the temple had been destroyed by the Romans. This was a catastrophe for the Jewish people and a severe test of their faith. If the dwelling place of God was gone, where did God go?

This was the question that both Jews and Christians had to answer. Christians remembered what Jesus himself had said about the temple. It would be destroyed and in three days it would be raised up again. At first they thought he was talking about a building. It was only later that they realized he was talking about his body. For Christians, Jesus is the dwelling place of God. And even though the Romans destroyed his body, God lifted it up again. Christians don't need the temple anymore because the Living Christ is now the place where heaven touches the earth.

As the Gospel of John says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." [John 1:1,14] And as Jesus says, "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me..." [John 14:11]

Some will say that it's hard to believe because they cannot see. Which is why God raised up the Church to be Christ's visible body on earth. As Paul says, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." [I Cor 12:27] Guess what that means. It means that we are the new temple. We are the new dwelling place of God. We are the place where God's Word now takes flesh, where God's infinite love now comes down into human dimensions, when we believe.

That's good news and not just for Christians. Jesus isn't just for Christians. He is a light to the nations, and not just our nation. He came because God so loved the whole world and not just a part of the world. [John 3:16] And "what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" and not just some people. [John 1:3b-4] Jesus is good news for Christians and also for Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, people of all religions and no religion—as long as we let God's love take flesh in us.

The world is going to need a lot of love in the coming year. Jews and Christians and Muslims are all children of Abraham. Think what a difference it could make to the rest of the world if we could just learn to love the members of our own faith family! And in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, I still believe that in Christ, anything is possible.

So my Christmas message to you and to all the children of Abraham: After a year that has been so full of bad news, God has given you the chance to be Good News. In Christ, God has reached down from heaven to touch the earth, to touch you, to love you, and through you, to love others, too.

I will end here with a bit more Hebrew, from Psalm 133: "How good it is and pleasant when kindred dwell together in peace!" *Hine ma tov uma na'im shevet achim gam yachad.* Peace to all and Merry Christmas.