

December 24th, 2011

Christmas Eve

One of the biggest challenges to creating a sermon is knowing the audience that will be receiving it. That is a problem because at any given worship service people are coming from all different places with all different experiences. One is happy, one is depressed. One person needs to hear words of comfort. Another needs to be confronted and held accountable for his or her sins.

Today some of you are here with joy and excitement to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Some of you are here because your spouse or parents dragged you. Some of you are here simply because it is what you do on Christmas Eve, and even if you don't get anything out of it, it is simply a tradition. Your expectations for tomorrow vary too. Some are going to bed tonight eagerly anticipating opening presents tomorrow. Some are anxious about all the cooking, decorating, and work still to do. Some are dreading having to spend time with obnoxious relatives that even now they can't wait until they leave. Some are mourning and feeling even more alone than normal because everyone else looks like they're having fun.

The little skit we just had may come off as a bit depressing, especially for Christmas Eve, but I'm sure it's a slice of truth for any number of people. Christmas perhaps feels kind of nice, but also hollow, artificial, and kind of pointless. Well, if you wanted something sweet tonight I suggest that you should have stayed home and watched the Hallmark Channel. I'm sure they have something nice on. But the church isn't in the business of being sweet. If you want the Truth, you're in the right place.

The truth is that when Christmas is about giving to your neighbors and, "Peace on earth, and good will to men," you might be in the right ballpark, but your still playing the wrong sport!

Yes indeed the angel choirs did tell the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." But again, this is a message that you can get from the Hallmark Channel. If you're hoping to find meaning in Christmas by being nice and not naughty, by being especially good,

by giving to the underprivileged and to charities;

I think in the end you'll end up like the husband and wife in our drama.

We need to go a step deeper, and one verse earlier on in Luke's gospel. The angel says to the shepherds, "...to you is born this day... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." That God came to earth in human form is not a *fact* to be believed. It is not a *church doctrine* that must be accepted. It is a *way of being*. It is a way of understanding yourself - as someone so valuable that God has decided to come to be in your form for a lifetime.

Perhaps I can illustrate this if I steal a thought from one of my colleagues and then distort it a bit. The Rev. Johanna Johnson, newly ordained pastor at St. Martins in Webster and Bethlehem in Penfield recently published an article called, "Emerging Lutherans, What the Emerging Church can Teach Lutherans about Church Renewal". She writes,

The Bible never says [of the earliest Christians], "They went to church." For the early Christians to *go* to church simply would not make sense; they *were* the church. I cannot say, "I go to Johanna," because I *am* Johanna everywhere I go.

And I think something similar goes for the celebration of Christmas. Christmas isn't a holiday to be celebrated. It isn't *something you do*. It is a fundamental part of *who you are*. "To *you* is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." That isn't just a statement. It is a way of life, a way of self-understanding.

We're off the mark if, even in church, we focus on shepherds and angels and wise men; even Mary. We're even off the mark if we focus on the meanness of the situation; Jesus being born in a rough place in the midst of animals by parents who are traveling because the oppressive Roman government forced them to. We really should focus on the one who has no speaking part at all: helpless little baby Jesus, God-with-us, born into a world of noise and clutter, anxiety and restlessness, uncertainty and vulnerability.

I wonder what God felt as he lay there in the manger seeing and feeling what was going on around him. Jesus never said what it was like. Ultimately it isn't important. What is important is this is the beginning of the ultimate acts God would use to

save us. God had come to earth to be with us, to be amongst us,
to be one in community.

“To you is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”
May Christmas be the reality that you live, not the passing
holiday that you celebrate. May God’s presence be in you, in
every open place in your life and in every dark corner. May God
be with you in laughter and tears, through brokenness and joy.

I want to end with this prayer from *Cloth for the Cradle* by
John Bell. A copy is in your bulletin if you want to follow
along.

When the world was dark
And the city was quiet,
You came.

You crept in beside us.

And no one knew.
Only the few who dared to believe
That God might do something different.

Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord?

Will you come into the darkness of tonight’s world?
Not the friendly darkness
As when sleep rescues us from tiredness,
But the fearful darkness,
In which people have stopped believing
That the war will end
Or that food will come
Or that a government will change
Or that the church cares?

Will you come into that darkness
And do something different
To save your people from death and despair?

Will you come into the quietness of our cities and towns,
Not the friendly quietness
As when lovers hold hands,
But the fearful silence when
 The phone has not rung,
 The letter has not come,
 The friendly voice no long speaks,
 The doctor's face says it all?

Will you come into that darkness,
And do something different,
Not to distract, but to embrace your people?
And will you come into the dark corners
and the quiet places of our lives?

We ask this not because we are guilt-ridden
Or want to be,
But because the fullness our lives long for
Depends on us being as open and vulnerable to you
As you were to us,
When you came,
Wearing no more than diapers,
And trusting human hands
To hold their maker.

Will you come into our lives,
If we open them to you
And do something different?

When the world was dark
And the city was quiet
You came.

You crept in beside us.

Do the same this Christmas, Lord,
Do the same this Christmas.
Amen.

From "Cloth for the Cradle"