

**Christmas Eve**  
**Luke 2:1-20**  
**24 December 2011**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

Thanks to Hollywood blockbusters such as “Saving Private Ryan,” “Pearl Harbor,” and Clint Eastwood’s “Letters from Iwo Jima,” even younger people today know quite a bit about World War II. However, knowledge of its predecessor, World War I, is often lost on us. We remember vaguely that World War I involved the same cast of characters as WWII, and we know that its unsatisfactory conclusion contributed to the rise of Hitler ten years later. What we may not be aware of is the stunning fact that 10 million people died in World War I. That's the combined populations of Virginia and West Virginia, wiped out in the span of four years, from 1914-1918. Millions of women were left widowed by World War I. Millions of children grew up without their fathers.

Unlike WWII, the First World War leaves us few tales of glory. It was not, as they sometimes say, a “good war.” It was a depressing conflict marked by the use of poison gas, brutal machine gun fire, and warfare waged from deep trenches. In these squalid pits soldiers lived and died for four straight years, fighting back and forth in the attempt to gain a few hundred yards of territory between them.

However, one story from the First World War does stand out. Hostilities had broken out between Germany, France, and England in August of 1914. By Christmas of that year, trenches had been dug across the French frontier, and already one million men had died. No Man's Land in between the trenches was strewn with bodies and craters made by artillery shells. The tension was incredible. Every soldier's finger stayed constantly poised on the trigger of his rifle. The only adequate way to describe the situation was as hell on earth. Yet that Christmas Eve 1914, *something miraculous happened*. As the day's fighting wound down and darkness began to fall, a German enlisted man set a small candlelit Christmas tree, sent to him from home, up along the edge of the German trench. Through the cloud of gunpowder and the smell of death, the tree served as a barely visible beacon of Christ in the midst of hell. For a while, troops on both sides were mesmerized by the sight, and then, slowly but surely, other candles and small, decorated trees appeared on both sides of the lines.

The glimmering Christmas light grew brighter, and ultimately some soldier, whether he was British or German no one remembers, leapt over the trench and walked into the danger of No Man's Land. Any other day, he'd have been riddled with bullets. But no one fired. Other soldiers followed his example, and within hours the Germans and British were celebrating the

birth of Christ together. They exchanged gifts of food, beer, and cigars. Christmas carols were sung. Opposing soldiers embraced. Death lost its hold on men who had just hours before hated each other.

How do we make sense of this? Through the beacon light of a Christmas tree, the life-changing power of God miraculously found its way into the trenches of the Western Front on Christmas Eve 1914. The German and British soldiers realized that they didn't have to wait until the horror of war was over in order to feel God's presence. God was with them—"Emmanuel"—sharing in their confusion, sorrow, and uncertainty. For twenty-four hours the veil of war was lifted from their eyes, and they saw one another as children of God. They laid down their guns and risked their own lives across No Man's Land in order to share with one another in the joy of Christmas.

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A long time ago in a forgotten little country, a working man and his very pregnant fiancé shuffle into a village far from their home to register for Caesar's tax. They arrive late at night, and the inns are all full. And so, they accept a begrudging offer to bed down in a stable with the animals. It is dirty and smells like—well, a barn—but it protects this awkward little family from the elements, and so they make the most of it. As fate would have it, that night the woman goes into labor. And on that Christmas Eve, too, *something miraculous happens*.

A mile outside of Bethlehem, an angel appears to shepherds in the fields and says "Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Then the heavens erupt with a host of angels, and the shepherds feel the holy presence of God all around them. They are suddenly and amazingly aware of "Emmanuel," that God is with them *always*, even the darkness of the wilderness.

The angel tells the shepherds to go and see Jesus, and when they do so, they actually take great risk on two levels. First, they leave their flocks vulnerable to both the darkness and the evil that lurks within it. Sheep are not smart, nor do they have any natural defense against predators. The shepherds have to keep a constant and vigilant watch over them in order to prevent the sheep from getting lost or mauled by wolves. The shepherds' trust in God to protect the flocks in their absence must be profound.

Second, the titles the angel uses to describe this baby in the stable are *political* titles: Savior, Messiah, Lord. They are a direct challenge to Caesar and the Jewish King Herod. By going to pay homage to Jesus, the shepherds declare that this babe in swaddling clothes is God's

Son and heir, supplanting all other authorities, and with Herod's men lurking about, this claim puts the shepherds' very lives in danger.

The shepherds indeed go and praise the baby in the manger. But once they've done so, do they go back to their flocks and to the relative quiet, obscurity, and safety of the wilderness? No! Luke tells us "they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them!"

The shepherds hear the angel's call to see and proclaim Jesus Christ, and at great risk they follow that call.

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As it did for the soldiers, as it did for the shepherds, Christmas offers us both grace and risk. For us as for them, God's grace is "Emmanuel," the promise that God is with us always in the trenches, the war zones, the dark nights when others seem to have no room for us.

But if that grace is to *transform* us—make us different—we have to *respond*. We must leap out of the trench; we must travel the cold and darkened road to follow the star; we must heed the angel's call. And it is in the response that we encounter the risk.

You see, there is another lesson to be learned from the First World War's Christmas Truce. It truly happened, but it also only lasted twenty-four hours. As Christmas passed, the men moved back into their trenches, and the gunpowder grew thick again. Willful humans extinguished the beacon light of Christ on the battlefield and allowed the veil of darkness to move back before their eyes.

The risk to us to answer the call of Christ is far less than the risk faced by the shepherds or the soldiers of World War I. We don't have to risk our entire lives or our livelihood in the face of either oppressive powers or enemy guns. Nevertheless, *we* must ask *ourselves* whether the risk of Jesus is more than we're willing to take. We presently live in a time of such recrimination and fear, in which it is easy and even encouraged to be suspicious of those who look, think, and sound different from us. We live in a time that encourages us to think of ourselves as victims, to hunker down and stay safe.

The shepherds risked everything to see and proclaim Jesus. The soldiers risked everything, at least briefly, to walk into No Man's Land and see Christ in the one who had been an enemy. And our commitment to Jesus, too, this Christmas must be all encompassing and total. We must risk the No Man's Land of our world, leaping out of our trenches and taking the risk to love our fellow human beings. When we do so with *everything we are* and *everything we have*, our lives are transformed and miracles happen.

It's Christmas Eve. It's dark outside, but there are beacons all around: glowing trees, stars, and angels. The only question is whether we will follow the beacon light. The only question is whether we will we seek the Christ child and declare him as our Lord.

Unto you a child is born this day in the City of David, who is the Savior, Christ the Lord.  
Rejoice, good people of God!

*Amen.*