

Sermon for Christmas Eve 2019
In these days and in this region . . .

I wonder if some of you have come to this Christmas Eve with some of the same mixed feelings that I have. This has been one of those years when it seemed as if Christmas just couldn't get here soon enough. Events of the past year have made me feel a sense of urgency and a longing for the birth of Christ. And yet, I also find Christmas this year to be challenging, even difficult. We may all have different reasons for our mixed feelings. Here's some of mine:

On the one hand, Isaiah speaks to us of this child named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, the one who brings endless peace and whose authority continually grows. On the other hand, we have continued violence and warring here and abroad—on our trip to Europe, just two weeks ago, while in Paris, we heard police sirens going off throughout the day—signs of the unrest and potential for violence because of the labor strikes. In Versailles, the palace was patrolled by soldiers dressed in battle fatigues carrying automatic rifles. In Rome, we also saw soldiers, dressed for battle, carrying the same kinds of weapons of war keeping guard throughout the city.

And closer to home,
the shooting of a police officer and
the attack on the Jewish community in Jersey City.
We still hear the boots of the trampling warriors
and see the blood-stained garments Isaiah speaks of.
And despite what Isaiah says,
we know that many still walk in darkness,
and we know that not every rod of oppression has been broken.

On the one hand, the angel proclaims,
“good news of great joy for all the people.”
On the other, it’s difficult to hear the angel’s voice
when so much of the news we hear today is not good.
For many people and parts of the world,
joy is in short supply.

On the one hand, I love hearing the story of how God intervened
“in those days” and “in that region.”
On the other hand, that’s not enough.
I want more.
I need to hear how God is intervening in these days
and in this region, in our time and in our lives.

On the one hand,
I want to “go now to Bethlehem and see this thing
that has taken place.”
I want to find the child lying in the manger
and be reminded once again that it is all true.
On the other hand,
it seems as if all roads lead to, well, places where
violence and injustice are perpetuated without abatement.

Such places as these are also a metaphor that describes the tragic in each of our lives and throughout the world.

Perhaps all those things say a whole lot more about me than they do about Christmas or this past year, but that's what I bring to the manger tonight. I bring my sadness, concern, and fear for the world. I bring my short-sightedness and my inability to see the prophetic vision of Isaiah. I bring my dissatisfaction with simply hearing the story one more time. I bring a deep longing and desire to become and live the story. I bring all this . . . and more. I don't think I'm alone in this. I think you also bring all sorts of stuff tonight.

I think we bring our stuff—whatever it may be—not because we don't believe the Christmas story but because we take it so seriously. And we're not the only ones bringing our stuff. Look at all the things that were evoked by or offered at the birth of Jesus “in those days” and “in that region.”

Isaiah offered his prophecy and vision of endless peace, the destruction of the oppressor's rod, and an end to the trampling boots and bloody garments of this world. The angels offered their songs of praise, and a message of good news.

The shepherds, the first ones to go to Bethlehem,
offered their wonder and curiosity,
as well as their status as homeless field workers,
outcasts, and the despised of society.
The heavens offered a star, a waypoint, a guiding light.
The inn offered a closed door—
no openness, no receptivity, no welcome, no vacancy.
The earth offered a manger,
a feed-trough to hold the Body of Christ, the Bread of life.
Mary offered her “yes,” her “let it be with me according to your
word.” She offered her pondering and treasuring.
She offered her trust in a mystery
that is too wonderful to be explained.
Joseph, the one who is so easily forgotten or ignored,
offered his presence, and his guardianship and protection of
God’s son and his mother, Mary.
He offered them a home and security.
He offered his silence, listening and trust
that God was speaking in his dreams.

The whole world has been moved and affected by Jesus’ birth.
All of creation has offered something.
It can do nothing less and neither must we.
These aren’t just characters, props, or scenes in the story.
They are aspects of our own lives.
They are parts of ourselves and our world.

It’s not difficult to make the connections.
We’ve had visions of peace
and we’ve also acted with fear and anger.

We've sung praises and followed the star searching for something new, something beyond ourselves, and we've also closed the doors of our life and hung a no vacancy sign.

We've offered shelter to and been guardians of the holy and we may have known times when we were mistrusted outsiders.

We've been welcomed as the bringers of good news and we've also been rejected and outcast.

We've planned our future, and we've grieved its loss.

The Christmas story is our story.

We cannot come to the manger empty handed.

To come to the manger with nothing is to come as spectators of history.

To bring our own stuff to the manger is to come as participants in Christ's birth.

Spectators might see God's son born in Bethlehem, but participants will experience God's son born in themselves. Isn't that what each of us longs for . . . and for the world?

After all, what does it matter if Jesus was born "in those days" and "in that region" if he is not also being born in these days and in this region? To paraphrase words attributed to Meister Eckhart, a 14th century monk, "What good is it that Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem over long years ago if he is not also born in us?"

Whatever it is we bring to the manger tonight is our means of participating in the divine birth.

So, take a moment and consider what you are bringing tonight?
Name the hopes and fears you want met in him tonight.
Name your thanksgivings and your disappointments.
Recall the joys and sorrows of this past year.
What desires and longings have brought you here tonight?
And what secrets make you want to turn and run?
What did you celebrate this past year?
What broke your heart?
Whatever you offer tonight at the manger
let it speak the truth of and about your life.

I don't know what you bring tonight,
but I do know that Christ's manger is generous enough
and big enough to receive what you might bring.
I believe that the child is strong enough and powerful enough
to change our lives and our world,
even when we can't see it or doubt it or don't believe it.
That's why I continue to show up here on Christmas Eve,
especially on those Christmases
that are difficult and challenging.

Can this child's birth really change our lives?
The birth of a child always changes and re-creates your world.
Just ask any parent.
In more ways than we can count.
So it is with the birth of this child tonight.

The promise of Christmas is that we will not leave here
unchanged . . . nor empty-handed.
Because, you see,
God brings more to the manger than any of us combined.

The grace and truth of the Word made flesh is ours—
given as a gift because God so loved the world.

It might take a while to recognize and live into this change
but the promise is trustworthy and true.

To us “is born this day in the city of David a Savior,
who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

And that is “good news of great joy for all the people”
in every time, in every place, and in every life.