

The Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2020  
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Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

*Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.*

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

Always ... always ... always ... there is this moment – in every telling of the story of that first Christmas – when we hear how Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem only to learn (after all that they have already been through) that “there was no place for them in the inn.”

If we knew nothing more about Christmas, this would be enough to tell us that the story of that first Christmas is not really a jolly story. No, it’s a story about unplanned pregnancies and hurt feelings, a story about hard times and uncertain futures, a story about plans interrupted and hopes squelched. It’s a story, in other words, about life in the real world.

That’s always been true of Christmas, I think, wherever and whenever it’s been truly celebrated.

But I suspect we miss that point most years. According to one of the old holiday standards, after all, Christmas is “the most wonderful time of the year.” That’s what we sing. It’s the song we want to sing heartily.

Now I would be remiss if I rejected the premise that Christmas is wonderful. It truly is. Very likely “the most wonderful time of the year.” But I would be remiss, as well, if I simply left it there. Because our celebrations of Christmas have never been that simple.

Thinking back on other Christmases I have known, I think of those times when the celebrations were overshadowed by terrible and terrifying news in the world.

In 2004, the day after Christmas, an earthquake generated a tsunami that claimed 230,000 lives in Indonesia. We celebrated Christmas that year, no way of knowing what would happen the next day. And then, on the second day of Christmas, nearly a quarter of a million people died in a matter of a few hours.

Eight years later, in 2012, a gunman entered Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut just a week or so before Christmas. He shot and killed 26 people – 20 children and 6 adults – in a matter of a few minutes. That act of violence cast a pall over Christmas that year – most brutally for the families, of course, and for the rest of us, as well.

And now, another eight years later, it's 2020. And COVID-19 has overshadowed not just Christmas but the whole year. Within the span of less than a year, this global pandemic has claimed 1.7 million lives worldwide, including more than 300,000 in the United States.

And none of these are merely "news" stories, of course. They're personal tragedies. Many of us know and some of us love people – real people, not just numbers – who have been infected or even died from the virus.

And the financial costs for some have been ruinous.

COVID-19 is, of course, the reason we cannot gather together here to celebrate Christmas the way we've always celebrated Christmas – with laughter and good cheer, with carols and candles, with smiles and hugs. Instead, we're obliged to keep the doors shut and tell you to stay home, to stay safe, to take good care of yourselves and one another.

Maybe that's part of why I felt melancholy as Barb and I decorated our Christmas tree at home this year. The Irish, I'm told, say that Christmas gatherings are always "peopled with absences." Decorating the tree this year felt a bit like that: "peopled with absences" ... ornaments reminding me of loved ones gone and of children grown and no longer with us.

All of which underscores how, even in a so-called normal year, Christmas is never celebrated UN-ambivalently. There are always some in our midst who are celebrating the holiday for the first time without a loved one – a spouse or a parent or a child who died since the previous Christmas. There are always those who wrestle with how to get through the season, struggling with a loss of a job, perhaps, or with depression ... or addiction ... or loneliness felt more sharply at Christmas, because it's supposed to be "the most wonderful time of the year."

Now I've no wish to come between you and your enjoyment of Christmas with these words of mine. But it occurs to me that for all that seems wrong about how we are obliged to celebrate Christmas this year, our celebration may actually more true to that first Christmas. And it may be a more authentic proclamation of what the Incarnation means for us and our world.

Most years, we can get away with a jolly celebration that misses the point. Even our crèches – lovely as they are – miss the point. They're all too sanitized.

Luke tells us that Jesus was born in an animal stall, surrounded by farm animals, in the muck and the mire and all that we might imagine. And after the birth, when Joseph cast his eyes around looking for a crib, all he could come up with was a feeding trough.

None of the comforts of home. And this all takes place in a backwater town called Bethlehem rather than back home in Nazareth. The grandparents, if they were still alive, are not witnesses to the birth. They're not on hand – nor is anyone else, it seems – to share the joy or to help out.

There is no one else to hold and cherish this newborn miracle. They're all keeping their distance. And so, Mary and Joseph welcome their child into a cold, harsh world all alone.

And the reason Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, in the first place, instead of safe at home in Nazareth, was a governmental decree – issued not for their wellbeing but for Rome's. Their only value was their tax-value. Augustus wanted to count all the people in the world, as though people were cattle or pigs. And so a decree went out from Emperor Augustus, disordering the world, forcing people all over to take to the roads on forced marches.

The scene is bleak. There's nothing charming about the improvised "crib" Joseph cleverly devises for this child. This child is just one more of many in a despised nation – given as much dignity by the government as a barn animal. When Mary and Joseph lay this child in a barn animal's food trough, it fits the value he's been assigned. It makes the point.

It's all there in the Christmas story, the one we tell every year.

Pain and disappointment and hardship and struggle are all woven into the fabric of the story. As they are all woven into the fabric of life. And so, any authentic celebration of Christmas does well to weave pain and disappointment with the joy of this birth.

But let us remember – and commit – to weaving the joy and gladness and peace and hope back in with the hardship and struggle, as well.

Because the real point of this story we tell at Christmas is not merely to remind us that life is hard, certainly this night is not given to teach us the insignificance of a human life.

Let us be clear to know and hold fast to why, even in a time of pandemic, we celebrate this night. For the real point of Christmas is to reassure us that God does not abandon us to a life of sorrow. The real promise of Christmas is that God enters into this messy world of ours as it is. The real good news of Christmas is the proclamation that every human life is precious. And the real hope of Christmas is that there is no place God would rather be than with us in our darkest hour.

I think that's why Luke is so quick to tell us that as soon as the baby was laid in a manger, an angel of God goes out to tell the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock by night.

The angel – the messenger of God – could have gone anywhere with the good news. But the angel of God takes a stand before shepherds. God sends word first to the humble, to those out in the field, probably smelling from a day – or a week or a month – of tending their animals.

And these shepherds, in turn, become messengers of the good news in the own right. They go to Bethlehem to see for themselves. Once there, they tell Mary and Joseph what they had been told. Maybe they could tell that these new parents could use some good news, an encouraging word from God to offset all the harsh messages of the world around them.

And maybe it was just enough, these words from ordinary shepherds. Maybe it was precisely what Joseph and Mary needed to hear:

- Maybe Joseph had begun to question what he'd taken to be the meaning of a dream he once had.
- Luke tells us that Mary, for her part, "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Nine months before, she had pondered the words of the angel Gabriel. So maybe Mary needed these motley messengers to remind her of that other messenger – and all that he told her about God's good favor.

Because when life is hard – as it so often is – it can be hard to remember that this life is precious.

God was still with them, right there in the midst of the muck and the mire. That's the good news the shepherds could share. "Peace was there, and joy, and love – not only in the best of times but also and especially in the worst of times ..."

And so this Christmas, in the midst of a pandemic, remember that Emmanuel means "God-with-us," not "God-up-there" somewhere. Emmanuel means "God-with-us," however far from home we are, however cut off we are from one another, however less than ideal our circumstances. This is where God is born. And that is our hope and consolation. Unto us a child is born and we shall name him Emmanuel.

Our friend Diana Butler Bass recently shared a couple of poems by Madeleine L'Engle for Christmas. They're not (either one of them) "jolly"; but perhaps they're what we need. One of them, called "Into the Darkest Hour," seems especially apt for this Christmas Eve in 2020, so I'll end with that:

It was a time like this,  
war & tumult of war,  
a horror in the air.  
Hungry yawned the abyss –  
and yet there came the star  
and the child most wonderfully there.

It was a time like this  
of fear & lust for power,  
license & greed and blight –  
and yet the Prince of bliss came into the darkest hour  
in quiet & silent light.

And in a time like this  
how celebrate his birth  
when all things fall apart?  
Ah! Wonderful it is:  
with no room on the earth,  
the stable is our heart.