

CHRISTMAS - A MEDITATION FOR CHRISTMAS EVE

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2, 6; 11:1-4a, 6, 9
Luke 1:26-38, 2:1-7, 2:8-20
John 1:1-5, 14

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Opening Sentences

Jesus Christ is the light of the world
The light shines in the deepest night,
And the night cannot overcome it.

Scripture – Read by Liturgists Pastor Catherine Foote and Pastor Amy Roon

As we seek to respond to Your word and will, and encourage one another in the growth of our minds and spirits, let us hear this morning's scripture from Isaiah, Luke, and John.

The Birth of Christ is Foretold

Isaiah 9:2 and 6¹

²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 11:1-4a, 6, and 9²

¹ A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
² The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
³ His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

² Ibid.

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He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
4^a but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

The Angel Visits Mary

Luke 1:26-38³

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The Birth of Jesus

Luke 2:1-7⁴

¹ In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ 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.

³ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989

⁴ Ibid.

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The Shepherds go to the Manger

Luke 2:8-20⁵

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"^l

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Prayer

Oh Come, Christ Jesus
On this Holy and Mysterious Night
And be born not only in the story of a manger long ago
But be born in our hearts in the truths of our lives
Even here, even now, this very night.
– Amen

So because Christmas Eve and because it is quite late, we might as well jump to the very point of the story. And the point of the story is this: It is when Christmas feels furthest away from you or impossible to be found, that is the very place when Christmas draws closest. And if this is a night and if this is the time in your life whatever this Christmas stuff is all about seems very far from you or very irrelevant to your life, this is a Christmas Eve for you and for all of us – for the story news is as it has always been that Christ comes and Christ is born in time we least expect.

It was there in that story that we heard of that time long ago, of the time of occupation and dislocation, when Caesar is sitting there on the throne, paranoid and afraid and where there is a displaced, poor family far from home and there is no room in an inn in town.

It's that way in 1818, 200 years ago on this night, when Europe has been ravaged by another Caesar named Napoleon, who has destroyed vast quantities of Europe, sent the economy into a turmoil and a volcano half way around the world in Indonesia has blanketed the earth two years before, in

⁵ Ibid.

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darkness, leading to massive crop failures in Europe and economic deprivation and starvation in what is present-day Austria and Bavaria.

And it is that way in our own world today, where our own Caesar sits on his throne isolated, paranoid, and afraid – for our country is divided against itself, in fear of anybody that we call stranger, and suspicious of one another. And in a time when the economy seems to be in a tailspin – is it not – political upheaval – not just out there somewhere but happening every single day in the news – and let us be clear a government shutdown this very night to just make the point: *there is no room and we don't want there to be any room in the inn in this country here and now.*

And whatever those stories out there at some other time or those big stories might mean, what might they mean in the particularity of your life and of mine?

Well, for this particular preacher on this particular Christmas Eve, it runs true as well. For here I am, on my twenty-fifth Christmas here in this church. And here, my last as pastor here at this church.

- Following a call to step out into an uncertain future, following a voice that says step out into the unknown and find there what I am calling for you to be and to do.
- Waking up at 2 o'clock in the morning. Do some of you know what I am talking about? Those 2 o'clock in the morning times when you wake up and you think, 'What was I thinking? What am I doing?'
- Spinning around, walking around, thinking about everyone and everything you love that you are losing – for what?
- Wondering if that voice in the night – that voice that I know and you know that speaks in the depth of your heart – if it really can be trusted and if it really is true.
- And wondering and worrying if you're really heading to Bethlehem? Or if you are stumbling off in the wrong direction out into the Sinai all alone?

Maybe you, too, know what I mean.

And the point of tonight and the point of the story is that when Christmas seems furthest away, it is when Christmas comes.

And it's that way in the story, of course, in a time of deep *dislocation*, God finds God's location. A home is found where there was no home to be found. And God's home, most miraculously, [...] a baby who grows into a man who people looked at and continue to look at and say there is one that shows us the love and the face of God and the way of love.

And there was in 1818, Franz Gruber and Joseph Mohr, in a time of chaos in Austria. They do not hear another dirge in a land full of dirges. But they hear a song of a silent and holy night that for the past 200 years and again on this night is reminding people to listen, listen – deeper and quieter – through all the noise all of the nonsense to that stillness and quiet, to what wants to take birth in you and in me and sing and share in the world.

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And for this preacher who gets out of bed at 2 o'clock in the morning – and it looks like you all did, too. And here we are way past our bedtimes, sitting up and listening to this story once again, and in this location and this time. Just look around and say, "I'm not lost. You're not lost. It's all right here. It's always right here." And you know that stepping out into the unknown? Well that's our lives. That's our lives! But the only way to find the life we're finding is to step out into the unknowing where everything possible can be found. And that thing that you and I say that we're looking for out there somewhere, that perhaps it's already being knitted and formed and created here in the intricacies and intimacy of our life here and now.

But the key, the key to getting there is this:

you have to, you have to let go with at least one hand.

You got to let go with at least one hand
of that beloved story you cling to.

I mean, that story full of trouble
and travail and hurt
and batterment and longing
and love.

You've got to let go
of one hand at least of that story
and hold out your hand for another story.

Because Christmas is always, always calling us out to a new story and a new place that we can't imagine our way into. But you have to reach out your hand to find it and discover it. And some of you here tonight know what I mean. And you also know tonight why tonight is the night that we talk about as full, of joy, yes, but of fear and trembling as well. For we're all sitting here wondering, Who would I be if I am not this who I am? And what might I be called to become? And God is calling all of us to a new becoming.

Which reminds this preacher on this very night of the story that began my journey here in June of 1994, at a time when two very young pastors stood here in this church at this very place, having come here from getting a *hundred* rejection letters from around the country – to churches they hadn't even applied for. Had gotten voted down by a church. That never, never is supposed to happen. And standing here in front of this congregation and ending our sermon with the word from a mystic from the Middle Ages called St. John of the Cross, who says this: He said in a time of chaos in his own life, he said, "I said to the man who stood at the gate, 'Give me a light that I may see my way into the darkness.' And the man at the gate, who is Jesus – who is always Jesus – says, 'Put out your hand into the darkness for that is safer and better than a known way.'" And on that Sunday morning this congregation put out its hand.

And now here on this 25th Christmas here, filled to overflowing with the faith, the song, the hope, the love, the courage and encouragement, the *incarnation* of Christ that this pastor has witnessed in this place, full now of enough fear and trembling but faith enough to reach out his hand into the darkness, as perhaps you find yourself, indeed, doing right now. I mean, putting out your hand into the darkness, into God's becoming all that is you and more than you, that you and I could ever imagine now, and stepping forth into that darkness where Christmas comes, where Christmas always is coming if only we open our hand to receive it. – Merry Christmas.

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