

Christmas Eve C (12/24/2018)

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

Why do we show up on Christmas Eve? It's the same old story, so what do you really expect to get out of hearing it one more time? Christmas is not only an event that occurred two thousand years ago and thousands of miles away. Immanuel, God with us, is born not only in a stable in first-century Bethlehem, but also in the life of every person who has embraced – and struggled with – the Christmas story ever since. How do you connect with it this year? What does it mean that Christ is born in you today, December 24th, 2018?

You could have been anywhere tonight. You could have been snuggled under a blanket with a glass of wine watching your favorite Christmas movie. You could have attended a friend's legendary annual holiday party. You could have put in some quality time with relatives you don't see often enough. You could have knocked out one more holiday tradition – cooking the beloved family recipe or finishing the thousand-piece puzzle or reading your favorite children's Christmas books. You could have taken a long, hot shower, changed into your coziest pajamas, and gotten into bed an hour earlier than usual. But you didn't. Instead, you got dressed up and came to church. Why?

Why did you show up on Christmas Eve? Maybe you were dragged here against your wishes. Maybe church itself is a tradition, something you do on Christmas Eve because, well, you just always have. Maybe you've felt lonely this season, and you wanted be surrounded by others – familiar faces or unfamiliar, it didn't much matter. Maybe you wanted to light a candle and sing Silent Night, that's all. Regardless of why you came, you had any number of other options. And let's be honest, you knew what you were going to get when you walked through the doors of the church tonight. No

surprises here, just the same old carols and the same old story. **How many times do you imagine you've sung these carols; how many times have you heard this story? And, what do you really expect to get out of hearing it one more time?**

Over the centuries, the little portrait has remained, replicated again and again in crèche scenes and crafts and Christmas cards. I'm sure you can name every detail: the humble stable, standing at a distance from Bethlehem's hustle and bustle; Joseph and Mary kneeling, their heads inclined reverently toward the manger; the baby resting peacefully in the hay; gentle beasts reclining beside the Holy Family; shepherds with their flocks just outside craning their necks to get a look at the Christ child; three kings and their camels arriving with gifts; and the angel perched elegantly on the roof, her wings spread and her banner reading "Gloria!"

Never mind that the stable might have been a cave. Never mind that Joseph was probably sacked out after the arduous trek from Nazareth, and Mary, still recovering from the trauma of childbirth, was likely cradling her newborn through the night, desperate to keep him from screaming. Never mind that there are no barn animals mentioned anywhere in the story – no donkey, no cow, no birds. Never mind that strangers arriving in the middle of the night and insisting on seeing the baby would not necessarily have been a happy chapter in the birth story. Never mind that the magi don't appear in Luke's account, but only in Matthew's, and that they weren't kings, there weren't three of them, and they wouldn't have arrived until much later anyway. Never mind that angels are enigmatic figures in the biblical narrative who are more likely to inspire terror than joy. And, never mind that Luke omits the part of the story

where Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus are forced to flee political violence and seek asylum in a foreign land until the end of Herod's tyrannical reign.

The popular portrayal fits more naturally with the quiet and candlelight of Christmas Eve worship. But lest we forget, **the first Christmas was messy for the people involved, mostly marginal people fumbling their way through the excitement and anxiety of this life-altering event. Like so much of life, their joy at welcoming the Christ child was interspersed with distress; their hope was commingled with uncertainty.**

This perspective sheds light on the ways that the story of the first Christmas interprets our lives. I was struck this year with the last verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem": "O Holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!"¹ **God's entry into our beautiful and broken existence is not just an ancient folktale. The promise of Christmas is that Jesus comes to us, abides with us, not only once in history, but again and again in the actual circumstances of our lives.**

In this way, the old story is ever new. So, how do you connect with it this year?

What does it mean that Christ is born in you today, December 24th, 2018?

Maybe you're like Mary and Joseph, struggling to make it through the nights with a baby whose smiles and cries are cause for both joy and exasperation. Maybe you don't have a baby, nevertheless you worry about the well-being of your children, grandchildren, or the children of others – families in crisis or in need. Maybe you're like

¹ Phillips Brooks, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, #279.

the shepherds, weary with the thanklessness of your work and the tedium of your life, and looking for a reason to rejoice. Maybe you're like the magi, longing for a sign to lead you to a new purpose, even if it means setting out across unknown territory far away from what has been familiar until now. Maybe you're like the angels, trying your best to show up for others and guide them to joy and hope, in spite of all the reasons for discouragement.

Dear church, **Christmas is not only an event that occurred two thousand years ago and thousands of miles away. Immanuel, God with us, is born not only in a stable in first-century Bethlehem, but also in the life of every person who has embraced – and struggled with – the Christmas story ever since. This is your story, so treasure it again tonight. Ponder the words in your heart, not simply because Christianity hands them down to you at this time every year, but because God is offering you good news of great joy in the very place you find yourself. To you is born this day a Savior, one who reflects God's loving heart, one who shares your life – your joys and pains, one who accompanies you even through the valley of the shadow of death and who guides your feet into the way of peace. Glory and praise be to God!**