

Message for Christmas Eve, Year B (12/24/2020)
Luke 2:1-14

We have all new candles on the Advent wreath this year – three blues, one pink, and the Christmas candle in the center. There’s something transcendent in the simple ritual of lighting a new candle each week throughout the season of Advent, and finally adding to them the light of Christmas on this most holy night. And, these new candles stand tall, testifying boldly to the confession at the heart of our celebration – that the light of Christ has come to chase away the night, not only 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem but also today and in the time to come.

The downside of wax candles, however, is that they burn down, and after about two years they don’t make quite the same impression. When I went to replace the old ones this year, I noticed that the Christmas candle, although shorter, still had some life in it. So, I put it on my desk in the church office, and I’ve been lighting it for inspiration as I prepare for Christmas.

Our new Christmas candle doesn’t have a design on the exterior, but the old one bore the image of the Christmas star in blue coming to rest over the manger. The star in its splendor signified all the fantastic and memorable details of the beloved story – the miraculous conception, the cosmic sign guiding the magi to Bethlehem, and the countless heavenly messengers filling the sky with light and singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on Earth peace among those whom God favors!”

But, as the old candle continued to burn down over the past few weeks, I noticed that the star gradually disappeared, leaving only the image of the manger, simple and nondescript, to adorn whatever was left of the wax pillar. What a fitting statement about Christmas itself. **Beneath all the miraculous layers of the biblical narrative, beneath the heavenly glow, lies the manger, ordinary in every respect, and the infant child who lies in it.**

As it turns out, the story of Christmas is as earthly as can be – an unwed, pregnant girl is engaged to a poor working man; an imperial superpower imposes its will on common people with impunity; traveling far from home, the little family falls between the cracks and is forced to find shelter wherever they can; agricultural laborers, invisible to the rest of the community, are hard at work in the fields. For as pivotal as the event of Christmas is, it's awfully familiar, isn't it?

The Reformer Martin Luther loved Christmas, although not for the pretty picture we've often made of the Nativity – pious Mary and Joseph kneeling beside the baby, surrounded by gentle beasts and wide-eyed shepherds, and attended by angels in flowing gowns. No, **Luther loved the Christmas story for its austerity:** “How unobtrusively and simply,” he remarks in a Christmas sermon, “do those events take place on earth that are so heralded in heaven!” Luther was particularly struck by the direness of the Holy Family's circumstances that first Christmas night, especially in contrast to the others who were lodging nearby: “The guests swarming in the inn were

carousing, and no one attended to this woman... [who] had not the very least thing needful in childbirth.” It was not lost on Luther that this would be hard on the new parents: “Do not make of Mary a stone. It must have gone straight to her heart that she was so abandoned. She was flesh and blood, and must have felt miserable – and Joseph too – that she was left in this way, all alone, with no one to help, in a strange land in the middle of winter.”¹

Isolation, loneliness, hardship, distress – that sounds especially familiar in 2020, doesn’t it? At the risk of stretching the story to fit our own experience, according to Luther’s reading the first Christmas was socially distant in every sense. Whereas the Holy Family was far from home, we’ve spent more time in our homes this year than many of us would like. Still, I think we’re in a position to imagine some of what Mary and Joseph went through: absence from family and friends, instability, worry about the days, weeks, months, and years ahead. And, **maybe that’s where we can find ourselves in the Christmas story again this year, alongside lonely and anxious people whose future, though filled with promise, is uncertain.**

“To you is born this day... a Savior.” That’s the message the angel relays to the shepherds, and the message we receive each and every Christmas Eve. **The great miracle of Christmas is neither the virgin birth, nor the star, nor the appearance of the heavenly host, but rather the promise that God does not abandon us to our circumstances.** Although the first

¹ *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, ed. Roland H. Bainton, 29-32.

Christmas takes place under difficult conditions, nevertheless as Cynthia Rigby observes, “there is a home” in the shadows of that stable in Bethlehem, “a home whose hearth is Jesus Christ himself. He is the center of Mary and Joseph’s life, the song of the angels, the mission of the shepherds. Where the Christ child lays, the story tells us, is home. This child is born for ‘all the people.’ He is our Savior, our Messiah, the one in whom our unsettledness gives way to great joy and peace.”²

That’s a helpful way to think about home this Christmas, friends – not as a quarantine or prison, but the very place where the baby arrives. **“To you is born this day... a Savior”**; that is to say, ***In your midst, the hope of the whole world has come***. You’re not likely to be visited by angels tonight, but treasure the words of their song nonetheless: “Glory to God... and on Earth peace....” That promise extends down through the generations, and to the end of the age. “For lo! The days are hast’ning on,” to quote the beloved carol, “by prophets seen of old, when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold, when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and all the world give back the song which now the angels sing.”³

² *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 118.

³ Edmund H. Sears, “It Came upon the Midnight Clear,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #282.