

Christmas Eve – Midnight Mass
Sermon for December 24, 2021
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

When I was six years old, I was in the Christmas Pageant at the church across the street from where we lived. My task was to memorize and recite our Gospel reading that you just heard and saw. The version of the Bible used, however, was not the New Revised Standard Version, in which all the world was to be registered. It was the King James, which we did read.

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea,

unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem;

(because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

I was very proud that I was able to recite the text verbatim.

Of course, I didn't know what it really meant.

I'd seen the pictures in Sunday School, a man and a woman dressed in drapes, and a baby wrapped up in blankets, and all those sheep and guys with big poles.

I didn't know what it meant that she was "great with child" – except that it must have been a good thing.

I figured the manger was the whole stable,
and I always thought she "laid him in a manger
because there was no room for them" in the end. – E.N.D.

In the end, Mary and Joseph stay in the stable.

In the end, Jesus is born.

In the end, the shepherds get to see angels.

In the end, the shepherds get to see Jesus.

In the end, everyone is happy.

In the end, it's Christmas! This is our second Christmas under Covid, but it a brighter Christmas, even under restrictions, that it was last year.

So we have decorations on the trees and lights on the houses, and presents under the tree, and lots of cookies, and we wish we had snow on the ground.

It's Christmas. And if we're good, maybe we get what we've wanted, after we go to sleep, so Santa Claus can sneak into our house and leave the presents under the tree.

It's Christmas. So once a year, we take time out to remember that on a cold winter night just over 2,000 years ago, a little boy was born. And he was the fulfillment of prophecy:

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given:
and the government shall be upon his shoulder:
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor,
The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”

I hear that and I just feel good.

There's something in that expression the just warms my heart.
This time of year, I just go about doing my chores singing Christmas Carols.
It feels good.

I don't know why we don't just have Christmas all year around.
It's just an excuse to be happy, and to like everybody, to be nice.
I see it at stores when people seem to act a little more courteously.
At least, I like to think that's the way we are at Christmas.
It's such a special time for such a special child.

And we are all special, too.
That's what Christmas has taught me – we are all special
because of the gift that God gave us with Jesus and Mary and Joseph.

I'm not just making that up.
In Jewish tradition, stories in the Bible are not just about the people in the
stories.

In Jewish tradition there is what is called “narrative theology,”
which means that the stories are to be read in multiple layers.

- There's the meaning of the story as it reflects on the time in which it happened.
- There's the meaning of the story as it has been passed along generation to generation by tradition.
- And there's the meaning of the story as it applies to us today – hearing it again, year after year.

You see for me, the Nativity of Our Lord, talks first about the origins of Jesus.

In Luke, Jesus is an advocate of the poor
so what better evidence than to have the messiah born in a stable
being adored by the poorest of the poor – shepherds.

Secondly, the Nativity has been integrated into the Great Narrative of the Old and New Testaments:
providing the beginning of life, recreating the epic journey,
fulfilling prophecies, and setting the stage for the rest of the church year:

Advent readies us for Christmas,
Christmas brings us the adoration of the Magi and the season of Epiphany,
when we realize the meaning of what has come before.
Then those realizations bring us to Lent, when we turn inwards
to prepare for the ordeal of Holy Week and Good Friday
before we celebrate the adulation of Easter and the Resurrection
and Ascension.

Thirdly, the Nativity teaches us, I believe, that we are all special.
That's the message I see in this story.
God reaches down into this world to be born of a young woman, Mary,
a girl really, and a man, Joseph, who take on the task of raising God's son to
be a man.
They nurture this child to be the person God has called him to be.
And that's the lesson for us.
We must do all we can possibly do to ensure that every mother and father
are supported and provided the opportunities to do all that they can to raise
their children to be the people God has called them to be.

This story tells me that every child born
is anointed by God for a special purpose.
We cannot know what destiny awaits,
and every child should be treated as a messiah
who may very well help us answer life's questions.

That is the challenge of Christmas – to live Christmas all year round.
To fill our hearts with the joy of this season now
so that we will forever know that every child born,
regardless of the month or the day, must be treated as a special child,
born of a special mother, raised by a special father,
and nurtured and cared for by all the people,
to prepare each child to be the person God meant them to be.

While I was researching Christmas for the sermons upcoming this week,
I found a Christmas prayer written by Robert Louis Stevenson.
It seems appropriate for the day in which we find ourselves.

Loving Father, Help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be
merry with clear hearts.

May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children,
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

May the stars above give you pause as you travel to your homes tonight
To envision a world in which each child born
Is heralded by a star declaring God's blessing on their lives.

Amen.