

It's Christmas, Thanks Be to God
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December 24, 2020

The Gospel lessons were read by other folks during the Christmas Eve service, so Pastor Cords did not read the gospel. He simply started with a prayer and then the sermon. *Ed.*

Let us pray. Lord, thank You. Thank You for Jesus. Thank You for Christmas. Thank You for Your presence in our hearts and in our lives at this very moment. Lift our spirits. Strengthen our faith. Fill us with Your goodness and bless us as we celebrate both near and far with those we love this Christmas, this celebration of Your coming and of our salvation through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I hope most of you are watching this or are participating in this online worship on Christmas Eve as we celebrate the gift of Jesus coming to us, the gift of God's presence with us. And I hope you have some candles with you so that we move to the end of the service, you can light candles, that this will be a candlelight service, even in your home. Candles have long represented in the church, that the flame on the candle representing the presence of God with us. So later in the service, as we sing "Silent Night," we want to make sure that you recognize that God is present in your midst, in and among whoever you happen to be with as you join together with others in this online worship service. So we hope that you have a candle and can join us.

This is Christmas. It's Christmas 2020, so it's probably different. Usually, Christmas is a time when we celebrate traditions and Christmas is one of those times when we like to do things the same way we've done them before. Oh, we love to add new traditions, but we want to make sure that we preserve the old ones as well. In my family, that's Swedish Meatballs, which Marilyn calls Norwegian Meatballs. I always say do you know the difference between a Swedish Meatball and a Norwegian Meatball? The person who's eating it. At least that's true in our house. Marilyn has Norwegian Meatballs and I have Swedish Meatballs for Christmas and they're the same meatballs. And you know what? We're going to have meatballs this year, but there are many other traditions of Christmas that we won't have. Getting together with our children won't happen in person this year. Other traditions have been set aside. We've not gone Christmas shopping. We've done that through a computer for the most part. There are many, many changes this year and for some of us, the disappointment has already come. Some of us are actually struggling with disappointment as we move into this season because so much has not happened this year the way we hoped it would happen. Maybe that's the case for you even at this very moment. We won't, most of us, be celebrating with the same friends and family we might otherwise or have in years past, or wanted to this year.

There are times when life is disappointing. There are times when life is difficult and often in these moments of difficulty, we want God to show up. Christmas brings the message to the world that God *does* show up, that God *is* with us. So we pray for faith that the Holy Spirit and God's Word would make us realize that God *is* with us. That is *the* Christmas message, *the* Christmas hope, *the* hope that we as God's children bring to the world.

And sometimes we'd like a sign, just a sign that it would be okay. As matter of fact, the prophet Isaiah in the first lesson that we read for this service, the prophet Isaiah is bringing God's word to Ahaz. Ahaz is a young king of Judah and he is being severely threatened by the king of Israel and the king of Syria, who have teamed up against him. There is another threat, that's maybe even larger, from the king of Assyria. So he's terrified and Isaiah's job is to speak for God to this young king of God's people, Ahaz. In the midst of his fear and in the midst of his insecurity, the prophet Isaiah says to Ahaz, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign." Ask God to show up in some way, so that in the midst of this horrible time, you can find hope. You can see that God is present with you, ready to help you. But Ahaz says "I will not ask." He says "I will not put the Lord to the test." Isaiah is having none of it. Isaiah says you're saying that you won't put God to the test is just your excuse for being afraid to ask God for a sign. You're afraid you won't get the sign you want. You're struggling with your faith. You don't know how to ask. You don't know what that, but God has told you to ask for a sign through His prophet. So Isaiah says, "Hear now, you House of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign." Even though you didn't ask, God will show up.

I've got to tell you. I want to encourage you to be a person of prayer. I want to encourage us to be a people of prayer. I want us to feel free to ask God for whatever we want, to ask God to be here, to bring healing, to bring newness, to the end this pandemic, to end the discord of our country and our world, to restore us. I want us to pray. I want us, just like the prophet Isaiah did, to ask.

But, this Christmas, let's remember what Isaiah says to Ahaz, who will not ask. Isaiah says for God, I will *still* give you a sign. This is what you will experience. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son and we will call him Emmanuel, the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed Promised Redeemer of Israel and of the world, will come as a baby, and be called God Is With Us. That's the promise of Christmas. The promise of Christmas is that God is with us, that God does not let these circumstances change His plan, that God does not the struggles of our world prevent Him from meeting us right where we are. God is with us. That's the sign. The virgin will give birth to a Son and he will be called Emmanuel.

Then we see how this plays out for we discover a bit about God's time and we discover a bit about God's way. It's amazing to me that this promise of the Messiah was fulfilled in the message of the angels, not to the king, not to the leaders of Israel, but to the shepherds in the field at night. And what do the angels say? They say, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all* people." The promised Messiah isn't just for the king and certainly not even just for the king of Israel because the promised Messiah comes for all people.

It's interesting. I don't know about you, but I have often, sort of, struggled with the idea of evangelism. I get a notion in my head that somehow it's pushy or it's inconsiderate, judgmental maybe, but this word from the angels, "Do not be afraid! I bring you good news" could just as easily and just as accurately be translated like this "Do not be afraid! I evangelize." You see, to evangelize is to proclaim the good news, to announce the good news. The angels come to these shepherds who are usually on the margins of society. They're not considered to be leaders or special. They're kind of the lowly ones. The angel said - don't be afraid. God is here. Good news has arrived. Everything is about to change. And you're the first to hear it. It will be a great joy and everyone is included.

Luke's writings make it clear that Jesus comes for all people, all people who need to hear this announcement proclaimed that the Holy Spirit might create faith in them. This is the announcement, the good news of Christmas. There's something else to be said here. This promise of this sign announced by the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz is coming years later. We hear that also in this lesson. It says "the time came for the baby to be born." The Kairos moment. Not "well, it was supposed to happen at 6 and it's five minutes to. I think it's going to be on time." Not the Kronos time, but the Kairos time, the time that it was right for God to do what God set about to do for all of creation.

We need to be reminded this 2020 Christmas that God knows what time it is. We might be impatient. God is not and so, even in the midst of our own confusion, even in the midst of some things that we find disappointing to our expectations, we can believe and trust that just as the birth of Jesus happened when "the time came," that God's activity in our lives and through our lives will happen at the right time.

On the surface, if you read in other places, it seems like Luke lays it out that there are sort of political reasons for Jesus to be born here in this time. He was in Bethlehem. That is, Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem because, while Quirinius was governor of Syria, Caesar ordered a census and so they had to move. So they were here, at this time and place and we get these political circumstances.

But this word, "the time came" reminds us that it's not those political circumstances. It's not these pandemic circumstances. It's God knowing how to show up for us and with us in this moment, in the right way, in the right time. The ultimate cause is from the God who controls our history until, as a people of faith, we put our trust and hope in Him. We watch and we wait and we participate in the very presence of God With Us, right now, in this very moment.

C.S. Lewis refers to the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, as the greatest miracle because, you see, Jesus is not just a baby born in Bethlehem to a young mother. Jesus is almighty God, Creator of the universe, coming in the form of a vulnerable little baby who requires care and feeding. You may notice that we're not singing the second verse of "Away in the Manger" tonight. It's a beautiful hymn, a beautiful carol, love it, but I just don't like the suggestion that "the little Lord Jesus no crying He makes" because the very point of Christmas is that God takes on the true human form of a baby and babies cry. So even if Jesus didn't cry in the manger that night, which is highly unlikely, that's not the right point to make when we discover that God comes and becomes completely vulnerable to the realities that are our world in order to meet us where we are, in order to express His love for us as we experience it. Romans 5:8 says this, "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

I don't know what you've done to prepare for Christmas this year in your home. I imagine you've decorated to bit or done some cleaning. Who knows, maybe you have a guest, maybe you have a child at home for the holidays, but usually, we think we have to get ready for Christmas. But the real story of Christmas is that it wasn't about *our* being ready. We, in fact, are not ready, but God comes to us in the midst of our un-readiness. While the house is still dirty, while the decorations are not up, while our life is still full of uncertainty, Christ comes. So we see in the incarnation, the deep love of Jesus.

Now there's something else about Christmas that is really good to remember, especially this Christmas. Christmas is a conjunction of words. It's Christ-mass. Just as God shows up incarnate in the baby Jesus,

we learn that God still shows up. We receive this promise and we celebrate it in Holy Communion, this sacrament in which we hear, in Jesus' words, the promise that He will be with us - God present - real, true, in love for us this very night, in and through the bread and wine. So we celebrate Holy Communion as we celebrate the Christ Mass. At the beginning of His life, Jesus becomes God incarnate in the Virgin Mary. As Jesus approached the end of his life, we see in the Gospel of John on that very last night before Jesus was crucified, we see that He instituted this holy sacrament, "as often as you do this, you do this in remembrance of Me. This is My body; this is My blood, given for you, for forgiveness.

Christ is present with us right now. He comes to make us right. He comes to forgive us, to free us, to lift our hearts, to lift our eyes, to abide in His very presence. Jesus didn't come to condemn the world. He came to save us. His name is Jesus, meaning one who saves. His name is Emmanuel, meaning God with us, as one who saves. This Christmas, Christ is present, with us, for us, in us.

We end our Christmas Eve service with the Christmas carol "Joy to the World." It's interesting. If you were to do a Google search for the lyrics of Isaac Watts' Christmas carol "Joy to the World," you will find that often the words have been changed. In many of the online resources, it says "Joy to the world! The Lord has come," but it's believed that Isaac Watts wrote "Joy to the world! The Lord is come." Does that sound like bad grammar to you? It sounds like bad grammar to me. It might be bad grammar, but it is good news, because it's not just that Jesus came in the past. It's not just that two thousand years ago, a baby was born in Bethlehem. Jesus, being born to Mary, tells us about a God who comes, who is with us. So "Joy to the world! The Lord *is* come." We celebrate His presence with us right now this very night and each and every day, as He promises to be with us where two or three are gathered in His name, as He promised to live in us by His Holy Spirit, so that we can live every moment as a Christmas moment, as a moment in which we realize that Christ is with us. Not that he *did* come, but that he *is* come.

And so let Earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing. We can celebrate the promise of God, regardless of the circumstances in which we live in this moment. We can celebrate Christmas today whether or not we've been able to do all the traditions that we're used to doing. This is the joy of Christmas. Jesus is here. Christ is present.

And tonight, if you heard in that second lesson that was read, we discovered something about the love of God. This is how God showed His love among us. He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. You see, we have an opportunity to live in the presence of the Lord *is* come. We have the opportunity to be reminded by faith, be reminded by the Holy Spirit, be reminded by the proclamation and the Word of God. God is here and so we can have hope. The prophet Isaiah asking Ahaz - ask for a sign. Clearly, you're discouraged. You need the hope of the promise of God's protection in the midst of this uncertainty.

God says this Christmas, I love you; I've come; I'm here; I'll meet you exactly where you are. 1 John 4:14 says this "And we have seen and rely and testify to this truth that the Father has sent His Son to be the savior of the world." It is not only our hope. It is our testimony. Christmas, this promised presence of Christ is what we rely on. We rely on the love that God has for us as He expressed it in the coming of His Son. Whoever lives in this love lives in God and God in him and so we walk forward in faith with Christ's presence leading us into the light, allowing His light to shine for us and in us and through us. Merry Christmas! Christ is come! Amen.