

Sermon Christmas Day II

Year A

[RCL] Isaiah 62:6-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7)8-20; Psalm 97

What We Need From Christmas

For churches across the country, the month of December is devoted to preparation—not only the kind of spiritual preparation that Advent invites; but rather, practical planning: where (and when) to hang the decorations, how to assemble the Christmas liturgies, when to organize the Christmas parties and festivities, and so on. Altar guilds and worship committees across the country are in high gear at this time of year!

And yet, beyond Christmas pageants and church bazaars (that’s daring enough for most of us!), there is a church in just about every community across the country that takes things to the next level and puts on a live Nativity scene!

You know the kind: a makeshift stable is assembled with live animals—a few sheep, a donkey or two, and maybe a camel if the committee started preparing well in advance. Someone dresses as an angel and stands on the rooftop of the makeshift stable, others dress as shepherds or wise men—which we’ll assume arrived a few weeks early. And of course, there are the central figures: Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus—usually portrayed by the youngest child in the parish. For a few nights in the lead-up to Christmas, everyone plays their part, standing as still as possible under the glare of a spotlight.

Most of us have driven by such a scene, and a few of us may have even participated in them. It’s a lovely image because it captures the scene we’ve grown up imagining and brings it to life before our very eyes. It puts us in mind of the Holy Family gathered with the shepherds on that first Christmas, rejoicing in the awesome power of God made flesh in this tiny little child. All is silent as the whole world stops to behold the birth of this child—the birth of God made flesh!

But if you pay careful attention to these scenes, you’ll notice that they are rarely as peaceful and serene as they first appear! For starters, livestock will be livestock: sheep are ornery, donkeys are stubborn, cows are lazy, and camels have a temper! The wind seldom cooperates, costumes fall apart, people fidget, and babies cry!

Despite all of our creative imaginings to the contrary, this unintentional chaos is more similar to the way things actually happened on that first Christmas than the peaceful and serene still-life that we so often imagine.

After all, if you’ve ever visited or worked on a farm, you can imagine the stench that must have accompanied Jesus’ birth; and if you’ve ever been anywhere near a hospital delivery room, you know that there’s no “meek and mild” about the miracle of childbirth! The truth is that the birth of Jesus was

anything but silent or peaceful or calm. Mary was a teenager made to grow up way too quickly, Joseph was in way over his head, and the conditions in which Jesus was birthed were less than ideal, even by first-century standards.

And so, why do we dismiss what we know about Christmas: that it was surely a scene of chaos and surprise, in favor of what we imagine about Christmas: that it was a peaceful and serene ode to Jesus meek and mild?

Perhaps the answer has something to do with what we need from Christmas.

In 2016 alone, more than 13,000 Americans have died because of gun violence. Nearly 3,500 of them were children under age 18. There have been more than 300 mass shootings this year, and nearly 300 police officers have been shot and killed.¹

We have faced the most vitriolic, negative, hate-filled, not to mention expensive, election in modern history. We're busier than ever, we're working harder and making less, and the cost of living just keeps going up.

And so, we imagine a peaceful and serene Christmas because that is precisely what we *need*. We need peace and serenity and beauty; we need a place to worship something pure—something warm and peaceful; something inspiring. We need a Christmas that brings peace and delight, rather than chaos and disorder.

But that's the paradox of Christmas! On the one hand, we desperately want to believe that Jesus' birth was a serene, orderly, peaceful moment in which the whole world stood still; but on the other hand, the Gospel stares us in the face and proclaims just the opposite: disruption, disorder, and chaos.

The Christmas of the Gospels reminds us that God in Christ hasn't come into our lives to make things a little more peaceful or to inspire us to be a little more cheerful. No, God in Christ has come to change everything we thought we knew!

God in Christ hasn't come to rehabilitate our old lives or to make them a bit more bearable; God in Christ has called us to a new life of redemption and resurrection!

God in Christ comes to us, not in the center of town or in an ornate palace, but in the place where we least expect him: in a tiny little town on the margins of society.

He is born, not in the presence of kings and princes and rulers, but in the presence of dirty shepherds and their even dirtier sheep. He is born, not of a princess or a queen, but of a poor, terrified, teenaged mother who did not ask for this!

¹ Gun Violence Archive, <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>.

This is the true story of Christmas!

And if we listen closely, we can hear God whispering something to us that, deep down we've always known but have been afraid to admit: The life we've so carefully crafted for ourselves; this world that we work so hard to manage and control, cannot satisfy our souls.

But the promise of God that was born on that first Christmas speaks to us still: God in Christ has come to us, not to give us more of the life we know, but to give us new life! Christmas is not the celebration of what once was a long time ago, it is the celebration of the One who was and is and is to come! It is the inauguration of God's redemption of the world in Jesus Christ—it is the beginning of our salvation!

And that, dear friends, brings joy to the world indeed!

Merry Christmas!

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Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

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