

Sermon Christmas Eve and Day  
December 25, 2014  
Titus 2:11-14, Psalm 96, Luke 2:1-20  
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*The Maker's hand flung stars across the night with angels bursting forth from galaxies, new music singing from the spheres in harmonies that blessed the dancing of the first-born light.*

*And then the light was darkened by an earth dimmed by torn dreams, saddened by shrill pride. Stars faded, lost their story, and died. The dance distorted in strange lies and anger.*

*Then Love's hand again was lifted. In a manger, again the Maker of the stars gave birth.*

This is Christian author Madeleine L'Engle's creative summary of the Christmas event. The birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem is God's novel response to a world gone awry. This second creation story is far, far less dramatic and seemingly inconsequential when compared to "Let there be light!" and "Let there come forth all living creatures on the face of the earth!"

This birth in Bethlehem, according to Luke's gospel, occurs mostly unnoticed except by a young couple, a few barnyard animals and some ragged shepherds. Luke emphasizes the relative insignificance of Mary and Joseph by placing them in a story alongside the mention of the Emperor Augustus Caesar. Augustus was the most formidable and authoritative man in the world. He ruled over the expansive and domineering Roman Empire of which Palestine (or Israel) was but a rural outpost. Augustus was thought to be son of a god. He would recline in a luxurious palace while the mother of God's true son gave birth in an animal pen.

Luke shows how a Roman census for tax purposes could disrupt the lives of all the subjects of the realm. Whether they liked it or not – the elderly, sick, disabled, or nine-months-pregnant – all had to travel to their ancestral homes. People defied Rome at the risk of their lives.

In this oppressive atmosphere, then, Mary and Joseph embark on the nearly 100-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. They are just a few more peasants on the move at the whim of Rome.

At the same time, it is crucial for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem if indeed he is the long expected one – the one who will save Israel from foreign domination. The anticipated Jewish messiah, it was believed, would be from the ancestry of David, the greatest king in Israel's history. Joseph's family roots provide that critical connection.

According to Luke, then, Jesus is born with little fanfare from powerless parents under the strong arm of Rome, and yet he is in the lineage of David. The stage is set for a new creation

that will take everyone by surprise except the Father, the Maker. Luke's is a story rich with both historical and theological significance.

At its very heart, this is a birth story. Mary and Joseph successfully have their first child even if the circumstances are less than ideal. Most of us know the inexpressible joy of holding our newborn for the first time. It's easily number one or two on my list of top ten life experiences.

As common as births are, each is never less than miraculous in that a whole, new little person comes out of a mother's womb. And every child is a sign of hope. Every child is full of the potential to make our world a better place. Parents willing to conceive express their hope for the world into which they will bring their child. Children themselves live with an innocence and delight we adults again and again need to recapture. They live neither in fear of the future nor with regret about the past.

I want to put in a plug for a show on public television titled, "Call the Midwife." This series, based on actual memoirs, takes place in a poor neighborhood in the East End of London in the 1950's. Young women and older Anglican nuns tend to pregnant women at all hours of the day and night. Each episode portrays the most caring and compassionate people you will ever meet as they help women – and families in every sort of circumstance – give birth. The show is pure goodness when so much else appeals to our more base instincts. Every hour will make you beam and bawl. "Call the Midwife" will cheer your spirit and quench your thirsty soul much like our story from Luke's gospel tonight (today).

Every year hope is the message of Christmas. The one born tonight (today) is more than just a miraculous human creation; he is mysteriously both human and divine. God loved the world so much that God sent his son. Jesus fulfills the promise that God will never forsake us. God will experience humanity from the inside by becoming one of us. In Jesus, creation and Creator are finally joined. Jesus is the bridge we cross to obtain heaven, and heaven can cross to infuse our lives.

In Christ we are not powerless against governments, rulers, ideologies, radical factions, terrorists, enemies or deadly diseases. The hope of the birth of Jesus into our lives is that in union with him, we cannot ultimately be defeated by anyone or anything. Jesus knows about, cares about and helps us through all the trouble we'll ever experience in our lives.

Earlier this week, I visited an older parishioner undergoing treatment for cancer. We chatted about the procedures he had undergone as he now awaited to see if it would work. He said to me with a smile, "You know, I'll be fine either way." That is a declaration that is based on complete trust in the faithfulness of Jesus.

I also visited a young man in great distress because his legal rights to see his children were being stripped. While I was there, he asked me to hand him his Bible. He said he had been identifying with Job lately, but he knew that he'd survive somehow because God had sent Jesus into the world to walk alongside him.

Finally, tonight (today), I want to tell you about a phone call I received yesterday. The woman was the manager of the Ivy Gates Apartments directly across from the church. She had a young mother with two small children who had fallen behind in her rent. She said the mother had brought in every penny she had but would have to be evicted by December 31 without a good deal more. The manager told me she hated that aspect of her job, but she had bosses, too. She had made many calls on the client's behalf, but every other church or agency said their funds were exhausted.

When we read in our gospel about a lack of rooms for Mary and Joseph, I was moved by a woman doing everything in her power to keep this young family in their rooms. I thanked her for calling me and took a check from our church large enough to keep the mother and children in their home for the time being.

Tonight (Today) we observe Christmas with beautiful carols, extra candles, poinsettias and crèche sets. May we keep Christmas all year long by being ourselves Jesus' agents of hope to others. In this way, we expand the new creation which started in that manger all those many years ago. That is always the best gift we can give Jesus on this, his birthday. AMEN.