**Preaching Notes for Christmas Eve (December 24, 2015)**

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[**Luke 2:1-20**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=99#gospel_reading)

Every year when I am confronted with Luke’s story of the birth of Christ I have to ask anew, “How can we tell the story of Christ’s birth in a way that does justice to its meaning for this particular time and place?” My job is made more difficult because I no longer serve a local congregation, so when I ask those questions, I must ponder them in a larger sense as I consider my audience, which is primarily clergymen and clergywomen in the United States. I do know that I have readers from around the globe, and that my audience includes certified lay speakers and ministers, Sunday school teachers, and others as well, but my primary constituency is preachers.

And so, as I consider the role that you play in your communities as we gather for the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ into the world, at the forefront of my mind as 2015 comes to a close are two unavoidable realities United Methodists will come face-to-face with in the coming year: General Conference 2016 and the election of a new president of the United States. Add to these events of national and denominational interest the recent terrorists attacks in Lebanon, Paris, Nigeria, Iraq, Mali, and Palestine, plus a downed plane in Egypt at the end of October, and the increasing number of Americans who seem to want to blame these problems on the Syrian refugees. Even with Christmas music playing and decorations already up in my neighborhood, I’m finding it hard to get into the Christmas spirit. As I ponder Christmas Eve and Christmas Day on this cold November morning, I am feeling more empty and vulnerable than cozy and secure.

Isn’t that just how Mary and Joseph must have felt on a cold December evening, Mary already in labor, and no place to even lie down, much less give birth to a baby? All the fancy crèches and peaceful nativity scenes in the world cannot erase the stark reality of the birth of the Christ child into this world. It was surely not easy, even as it is surely not easy for us today.

And yet his birth gave Mary and Joseph hope. And his birth continues to give me hope. For he was born into this world not to make us all feel warm and comfortable and secure, but to challenge all of those who would make this world cold and unsafe and difficult for so many.

As we gather in the warmth of our sanctuaries on this most holy of nights, let us not forget even for a moment that there are millions of people who are out in the cold tonight. There are mothers giving birth to babies in refugee camps and active war zones. There are families with no safe place to lie down and sleep. There are children who are dying from lack of food and water and exposure to the elements. Their innocence is lost. Many are left orphaned by the ravages of war. We who are privileged and safe cannot celebrate the birth of the one who came to save us without remembering the ones who need saving the most: the least and the lost, the blind and the lame, the hungry and the oppressed, the most vulnerable people of this world who suffer in every generation.

I’m going to imagine that in some of those places in the world where people are suffering there are folks around who, in the name of their own faith in Christ, have left the security and comfort of home and gone to help. They are out there, handing out food and helping to alleviate some of the suffering on this sacred evening. They are out there, working the late shift at the community hospital. They are out there, serving the homeless in the local overnight shelter. They are out there, holding the motherless children and whispering words of love in their ears the way Mary and Joseph must have done with their newborn baby.

As I have done the past two years, again this year I would like to share one of my father’s annual Christmas sonnets. My dad, who is a retired United Methodist minister and an accomplished poet, wrote a poem based on one of the readings for the fourth Sunday in Advent every year for twenty-five years and send it out as his Christmas card. This one is called “Pageant.” You have his permission to share this poem if you wish in your congregation, but please do not reproduce it in print without seeking permission from me, dchesser@umcdiscipleship.org.

*Pageant*

Luke’s Gospel doesn’t mention any offer

Of any help from Joseph or anyone else.

Was it then up to Mary alone to deliver,

Cut the cord, and tie it off herself

Out in that rough barn in the dark and cold,

The raspy straw between her and the earth

Wet now with her own blood, and her not old

Enough to know aught about giving birth?

Childwoman. Knowing what any innocent

Would know to do—cradle the baby, kneel,

Lay him in the manger—play the old pageant

Of make believe. Only, she did it for real.

God help us all to do how children do.

Keeping make believe, and believing too.

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[**Isaiah 9:2-7**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=99#hebrew_reading)

What does it mean for us on this night to proclaim that we, “the people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light; and those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.”

Generations of Christians have interpreted these words from the prophet Isaiah to be a foretelling of the birth of Christ. On this night in which we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the one we proclaim as our Lord and Savior, to do any different would be a disservice to those whom we serve.

The prophet’s proclamation was made to a people in exile. They were living in Babylonian captivity. The life they had known was gone, the present was frightening, and the future was unknown. How many of the people in our pews tonight can relate to that sort of condition?

This is a night when many of us will welcome strangers and visitors into our sanctuaries. Why do people come to church on Christmas Eve when they don’t worship regularly? For some, it is simply out of a sense of nostalgia or tradition. For others, they may be looking for something to hold on to because Christmas is a difficult time.

Who might be sitting there in darkness? Are there those who are facing Christmas for the first time since losing their beloved spouse, or partner, or parent, or child? Are there those who are separated from their families because of divorce, or deployment, or illness, or unresolved conflict?

Are there those who are facing an uncertain future defined by cancer treatments, or the progression of a terminal illness, or the slow disappearance of memory?

How can we bring a word of hope to those who are in the midst of darkness this year? How can we help them to see the great light of Christ shining a way forward? How can we increase their joy and give them a sense of endless peace when the present and the future seem uncertain?

Our hope is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Our hope is in the one who has broken the yoke of their burden and taken away the rod of their oppressor. Our hope is in the one we call Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[**Titus 2:11-14**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=99#epistle_reading)

I am guessing that not many people choose to preach on the letter attributed to Paul and written to Titus on Christmas Eve, even though this is the only time in the lectionary that a reading from Titus appears. However, it is possible to bring the concerns of the author to the sermon even if the reading does not take center stage.

What are his concerns? That because the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all, we are called to respond! We are to repent our impiety and worldly passions so that we can live lives of self-control and be upright and godly while we wait for the full glory of Christ’s return.

Is it unreasonable to remind ourselves on this eve of a day that has been overtaken by the consumer marketplace that being disciples of Jesus means exercising a little bit of restraint?

I write these words the week before Thanksgiving. Every store in my neck of the woods has Christmas music blaring and displays of canned pumpkin and marshmallows, fresh and frozen turkeys and boxes of stuffing, piles of cranberries and nuts, and towers constructed of ingredients for green bean casserole. What have we become? How can we not heed the call of the author of the letter to Titus in the midst of all of this?

Maybe we need to be reminded that on this night in which many are preparing to head home where they will proceed to stuff their Christmas stockings and turkeys and stomachs, there are many places in the world where children are starving, where there is no safe place for them to lay their heads, and where daily life is defined by violence and oppression and unimaginable horror.

Perhaps we need to be reminded of our need to welcome the grace of God born into this broken world in Jesus Christ by renouncing impiety and worldly passions and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ. Because it is he who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.