

Christmas Eve Sermon
December 24, 2020
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South Dakota Synod, ELCA

Dear siblings in Christ in the South Dakota Synod,

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! –

How many times have you heard the Christmas story from Luke in your lifetime? If you are like me, I think it is safe to say too many times to count. But nevertheless, once Christmas comes around, I re-read the story and eagerly await to hear it yet again on Christmas Eve. Just thinking about it sparks the rich imagery of my birth family sitting in my home congregation's small church building. I find myself nestled in between my grandma and my mom, leaning against their warm wool coats, with no care in the world. The opulent aroma of freshly cut greens and Christmas apples dangling from the towering slender tree mingle with the smell of real lit candles, fills not just the air but my entire being. Beloved Christmas hymns vibrate in my ears and I swear I hear and feel my grandma's and my mom's crystal-clear voices sing beloved hymns which have sustained them through life's joys and challenges. I look around our tiny church, which every year on Christmas Eve is filled beyond fire code capacity, and for a moment in time everyone's eyes well up with tears of joy or soul stirring memories. These almost realistic recalls spark a wonder in me. Is there such a thing as too much Christmas?

Looking at my social media accounts these past few months I don't think so. Just last year we still lamented the fact that stores would deck the halls for Christmas in late summer/early fall. But this year "twas the time long before Thanksgiving, when all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse; the stockings were hung by the chimney with care; in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there." Adapting a beloved Christmas poem by Clement Clarke Moore; many of us chose to decorate for Christmas early this year. Trees, wreaths and decorations went up as soon as the nights began to draw longer the first weekend in November. Lights were hung and turned on many weeks before the season of Advent arrived at our doorstep. Why is this, I wondered? Again, according to my social media friends and people I spoke with, it is the longing for light in the midst of this pandemic darkness. 2020 has altered our life beyond what we are comfortable with. We have been stretched beyond capacity and are weary. We wonder, is there really a light at the end of the tunnel? Where is the silver lining? We are drained and feel more like the dried-up ingredients in a fruitcake

than sugar plums these days. Therefore, we deck the halls, maybe not with “jolly” this year, but with the hope that it creates a sense of lit up normality, at least in our own four walls.

Cradling this deeply rooted need for light and hope in our life along with our treasured memories of Christmas’ past we arrive at Christmas Eve. We come to the manger with parched souls and weary spirits in order that our thirst may be quenched and we walk away refreshed. Christmas Eve worship this year looks and feels different for all of us. Some worship online, others in person with only a few people gathered in the sanctuary at a time. We may hear the hymns of old played on the organ or piano and sung only by a cantor, while our voices remain silent and we only join with our heart. I have heard of congregations gathering around large bonfires on a farmer’s ranch. While assembling outside you may hear the livestock in the nearby pastures. Wildlife may surround you with a bit of wonderment about all these strangers out in their habitat. And yes, you may just be cold, wishing you’d worn a warmer coat, added another layer or simply would have thought to bring a blanket. Indeed, the way we gather for Christmas Eve this year has changed, but the story of Christ’s birth has not. It still carries abundant and untarnished light and hope for you and all people.

In fact, I see an opportunity in our changing circumstances to hear this old, old story fresh and anew, in ways we have never heard it before. I get it, you may have had your share of fresh and anew this year, and are not up to more. But before you tune out, hear me out, please. All you need to bring to this new are your ears and your yearning for light and hope, which is all you came with to this sermon to begin with. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 10:17 that faith comes through hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. So, let’s hear the word of Christ.

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ... and everyone went to their own town to register.” I couldn’t help but hear the following when I read those opening verses from the Christmas Gospel: “In those pandemic days the Bishop of the South Dakota Synod issued a request that all should be wearing mask and if at all possible, not gather in person.” I am struck by the emotional similarity in the Christmas story and our story. I wonder if Mary, who was full term in her pregnancy questioned why she hadn’t stayed longer at her cousin Elizabeth’s house and delivered the baby there? Instead, she is on her feet, tired, dusty and exhausted from the journey, hoping to make it back in time to Bethlehem for an at home delivery of the Son of God that was growing in her. I ponder, if Joseph would rather have had extra time at the shop to finish up a project or two before the baby arrived. I can’t help but think that both Mary’s and Joseph’s life were inconvenienced by a census they hadn’t planned for, but knew they had to participate in. They simply didn’t

have a choice. I wonder if they felt they were left with no choice first by God as he simply announced to them that Mary would be the mother of God's only son and then by Caesar Augustus as he ordered the census and there was no other choice than showing up and abiding by the decree. Both, Mary and Joseph, weren't short of divine encounters. Who can forget the angel's visit as Mary prepared to become Joseph's wife? I am not sure that inconvenience is a strong enough word for the encounter in Mary's home. Life as she knew it was altered at once and forever by the angel Gabriel's visit and announcement. And Joseph, well, Joseph also met God's messenger.

After learning that Mary was with child, he quietly contemplated to part ways with his fiancé over her conception. And that's when the divine messenger showed up at his front door. I am sure by the time both of them arrived in Bethlehem they were beyond tired and running a bit thin. And who wouldn't? Naked eyes only saw a couple. To the unknowing observer Mary and Joseph looked like any other couple on the road. No one, just looking at them, could see that in the dark of Mary's womb, grew the light of the world. The light that no darkness would ever be able to overcome. To the innocent bystander Mary's and Joseph's heart beat just like everyone else's, when in fact their's were filled with the hope of the world. You see, to your neighbor, you look like any other neighbor. There is nothing different about you just looking at you. But as you hear the Christmas story, you reconnect with the light and hope that resides in you since you first heard the story. Now you are pregnant with light and hope. You are reminded that you are part of this story, that this story is your story, because as God's beloved child you also hear in Jeremiah 1:5 that before you were born God knew you. In fact, you hear that you are his very own thought from his heart and work of his hands. Long before the world counts you in, he already claimed and counted you. You are HIS, because of the light he placed in Mary's womb and the hope he placed in Mary's and Joseph's heart and because you were baptized into this great cloud of witness to eternal light and hope.

"She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn." No one ever wants to play the role of the many innkeepers that slammed the door in the couple's face or the one inn keeper that directed them to the place where there was a manger. It seems so harsh. No one wants to be the innkeeper that withholds hospitality from God himself. Your pastors and elected lay leaders this Christmas season feel like they play the role of the innkeeper, wrestling with limited seating and how to best keep everyone safe while still proclaiming the word of light and hope.

Reading this part of the Christmas story made me be more compassionate towards the inn keepers. And may be the next time I am offered the opportunity to embody that role

in a Christmas play or in my daily life, I will accept it more readily, and more importantly embody it with more empathy than I ever have before. I want to believe that none of the inn keepers actually slammed doors into Mary's and Joseph's face, but in all sincerity had no room in the inn for them. Fire code is fire code, pandemic recommendations are pandemic recommendations. Both are in place to keep neighbor and self safe, not to be rigid, difficult or political.

Here we are in these strange pandemic times, where nothing is as it was before and, in all honesty, will never be as it was before. The moment Mary and Joseph learned that the baby was on the way life for them had changed and not just for them, but for all of us. The moment Jesus was born there was no more turning back. Do you remember the story of Nick at Night? Nicodemus showed up much later in Jesus' story, but there is a connection between Christ's birth, the arrival of eternal light and hope, Nicodemus's exploration and our life today.

In the Gospel of John, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark of the night, inquiring; "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." See! There it is, once Jesus enters into your space, you can't help but notice that life as you knew it will be no more. And as Jesus and Nicodemus continue their conversation, we hear Nick wonder out loud after hearing Jesus speak about being born from above; "How can a man be born when he is old? ... Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" There you have it, once Jesus was born, the world was about to change. Even old dogs can learn new tricks. Even your congregation can gather in new ways and explore God's calling and presence in your life all new and fresh. Heed Mary's words from Luke 1; "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things." And as she continues to break out in song, she prophesizes how the world is about to turn in the light of Christ's birth, God's only Son. And nothing, absolutely nothing, will be like it was before.

While we usually hear those words as words of hope, I wonder as we hear the Christmas Story this year with pandemic laden ears, if we hear these words of old as doom? With the pandemic, trouble arrived at our doorsteps, and our life has been changed from then on out. With Jesus' birth, life as we know it has been changed. In Paul's first letter to the people of Corinth we hear him say at the end of chapter 6 that we were bought at a price, which he explains in greater detail in his second letter to the same congregation. In 2 Corinthians 5:15 Paul reminds us that "because Jesus died for all," we, "who live should no longer live for" ourselves "but for him who died for" us "and was raised again."

And there it is, in these last few words “and was raised again.” That’s it. Yes, our lives have been altered, and they indeed will never be the same as they were before, and these are hard times, no doubt about it. Death has left a trail of destruction across the world and our nation. But that’s not the end of the story. In the words “and he was raised again’ lies the light and hope for today and all the days to come until Christ will come again at the end of all time. The pandemic has altered our life in ways that we can yet not fully gage. And yes, it is scary! But the pandemic does not have the last word. God’s message of Christ’s birth has changed Mary’s and Joseph’s life, and in all honesty has made their life at first sight more difficult and challenging. But at the same time Jesus’ arrival has conquered darkness with light and hope. The arrival of Jesus has lit up the night sky in Bethlehem, inspired angels to sing and propelled shepherds to run fearlessly. What does Christ’s birth inspire you to do as darkness yet surrounds us and our neighbor?

Beloved siblings in Christ, baptized children of God, the pandemic has lost its grip. Yes, it may still hold us tight as we look at the steadily increasing numbers, but it has no hold on us as we live with Christ’s eternal light and hope placed within us. Now, go and tell it on the mountains, that Christ the Lord is born! Born for you and me and a world that is draped in darkness. Run in haste and be bearers of light and hope.

Amen!