

"Discovering Christmas"

Luke 2:1-14

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

Christmas Eve

Prayer: Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the savior of all, lying in a manger. On this holy night draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly host that we may sing your glory on high. Give us a place among shepherds that we may find the One for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Believe it or not, Christmas actually gives preachers fits. It isn't the busyness of the season or the crass commercialization of something so sacred that bothers us most. What gives us trouble is that it's the same thing every year. The story doesn't change.

Unlike a new toy or gadget that comes along each year and is all the rage, we preachers have the same story to deal with along with the same cast of characters. Then there is the added challenge that many of you are visiting tonight, perhaps from out of town and this is the only time you get here. I'm sure you must leave shaking your heads and saying to yourselves, "That guy is a broken record—he's only got one sermon in him!" And on this holy night it seems to be true.

Because what does one say year after year about tonight that hasn't been said many times before? To demonstrate my predicament, I actually turned to a Biblical commentary to see what fresh, perhaps new insights it might offer regarding these familiar texts we've read tonight. Here's what it said, for example, about the passages from Luke.

This passage, so beautifully crafted in Luke's narrative, certainly counts among the most familiar passages in the Bible. Dramatizations of the Christmas story as well as repeated readings make it a well-known text. People in North America who know little or nothing about the Christian faith know about the shepherds and the angelic chorus. For that reason, the text presents a challenge to the preacher to hear and declare a fresh word that probes the familiar and yet moves beyond it (*Texts for Preaching—Year C*, pp.45-6).

Well, thank you very much for that helpful insight! I already knew that which is why I opened the book. And yet—and yet to probe the familiar while moving beyond it is indeed the challenge, it

seems to me, and not just for me but for each of us. To probe the familiar and yet move beyond it. I like that.

Now, probing the familiar is the easy part. It's what we love to do. This is a time of great tradition and memory. Most of us can recall those Christmases long ago—when our children were young or perhaps when we were children ourselves. Who cannot recall from days gone by how this night of all nights was one of wonder and amazement? I know I can—barely able to contain myself through a night of sleep anticipating the morning to come. And what parents haven't tried in some way to recreate that for their children as a way of going back to that time in your own life if only to visit it once again?

And then of course there are the tables. Who cannot picture the tables around which sat the generations to share a Christmas meal? Who cannot still hear the laughter and even now, close their eyes and take in the scent of pies baking, meat cooking and gravy simmering in a grandmother's kitchen. It was all the evidence we needed that the love born this night some 2000 years ago in a Bethlehem barn was very much alive and experienced in those who gathered around those tables with us. Probing the familiar is the easy part—it's the part that comes naturally to us on a night like this as families gather once again and gifts of love are exchanged.

And even probing the familiar, overtly theological Christmas themes comes easily—the gift given to us by God—the gift of the Christ child who has come to save us from our sin and in a real way, save us from ourselves. Or what about the familiar laments over the commercialization of the season and the danger of losing its significance in the noise and blare or maybe in our own cynicism?

Those are familiar Christmas themes and they are all valid. Sometimes the message of Christmas does get lost in all the hoopla, but in other ways as well. It gets lost when we opt for war, forgetting that the One whose birth we celebrate is the Prince of Peace. Or when we forget that the greatest gift we've been given has come to us with a pretty heavy price tag and some strings attached, requiring us to act—to do something with it and because of it.

Those are familiar old themes and probing them on this night is easy and important. And yet moving beyond the familiar is the challenge. And it's our challenge each year.

And so maybe the commentary is right? Maybe discovering Christmas—moving beyond the familiar can only be done by unwrapping its meaning each year when it once again presents itself to us? Maybe that is its real gift? Discovering the meaning of Christmas—the real meaning that it has for you, requires that we move beyond the sentimental and the familiar, beyond the magic and nostalgia of the past and into something altogether new.

So let me ask you, have you considered doing that? Have you discovered Christmas—really discovered what it means for you—what it means for the world in which we live?

How does Christmas address your doubts and fears? What does it mean for your guilt and shame? What does Christmas mean for those broken and crooked places in your life that you've longed to have fixed and straightened out? Maybe discovering your own place in this story is what's required if you wish to move beyond the familiar.

Luke's version of the story is so familiar. On that night, shepherds were tending to their flocks when something happened. According to the text, an angel appeared and they were terrified. But the angel told them not to be afraid, that there was good news in the air—that a child had been born who is the savior. And according to the angel, the sign that this was the case is a baby who could be found wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger. Then the night air was filled with a chorus of angels singing. And while it is made to sound spectacular, the basic premise of the story is all too familiar if you really pay attention to it.

A child is born into a troubled and violent world to unwed parents who were living in temporary housing while the news gets announced to people making less than minimum wage—itinerant workers used to sleeping outside, under the stars. Doesn't a hearing like that of the story both probe the familiar and yet move us beyond it?

And if the good news of God's coming to us occurs through ordinary people whose lives were less than perfect, and who struggled with real problems and then first announced to shepherds of all people, then isn't the message of good news available to everyone? The birth of the One we celebrate *is* good news for everyone—for people sleeping this night in homeless shelters or families on the run as well as those who will never know financial hardship. And it is good news for the lonely and the lost, and all those desperately longing to hear the words "fear not" uttered to them.

Despite the miraculous literary references in this text to angels singing, which are perhaps fitting and necessary in order to describe the story of God's coming among us, I remain convinced, however, that at its core, this is a very human story. It is a story of a young couple living in a time of deep uncertainty, facing difficult choices and decisions, and yet somehow finding themselves visited by God. And who among us doesn't want to see ourselves somewhere in a story like this one?

That the One who has come among us in a very real and human way, and in a way that defied everyone's expectations, suggests that it can still happen that way. Have you moved beyond the familiar and discovered Christmas anew for yourself?

Through your own experience, you know that Christmas doesn't just happen each year—it takes a lot of work to pull it off. And so rather than just letting it happen, letting it unfold around you, how intentional have you been about making it happen—about discovering Christmas and unwrapping its meaning for you and for your life?

How has the light of the One who came long ago and who still comes, illuminated your way? How has that light exposed the dark places you have been avoiding? And how has that light pierced your darkness and given you hope?

The Christmas challenge is to move beyond probing the familiar, which is what we love to do, and is to instead search for and discover ourselves, lodged somewhere in this ancient story. And might I suggest that you will have begun to discover Christmas in the truest sense when the hopes and fears of all your years are indeed met in the One who has come among us and who is now found, lying in a manger.

It is another Christmas and we've heard and sung the familiar story, like we do each year. And yet each year like a gift, Christmas offers us something new, like the opportunity to receive it once again and claim it as our own.

Amen.