

What Do You Need for Christmas?

Luke 2:1-14

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

December 24, 2017

Christmas Eve

The question is usually asked, “What do you want for Christmas?” Tonight, I’m asking you to consider this: “What do you need for Christmas?” That’s a very different question.

Think about that for a moment. You know what you want. Presumably you’ve dropped enough subtle hints along the way that at least some of your wishes will come true.

And those things are all well and good. Gifts are a lovely way of showing our love for another and demonstrating how much we care about them. But my hunch is that even if you get everything you want this Christmas, you could probably live just fine without any of it. But what do you need is a different question, as wants and needs are not the same. What we need suggests a greater urgency—something deeper and more profound.

Remember Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, with our more basic human psychological needs at the bottom, such as being safe, experiencing love and a sense of belonging? If basic human needs are left unmet, or if they are threatened by circumstances and outside forces, it results in uncertainty and anxiety, even fear.

And while you may have shared with your loved ones what’s on your wish list this Christmas, perhaps you’ve never shared with anyone what it is you really need. I wonder if that is why you are here tonight, to address your deepest and most heartfelt need? Because long gone are the days when there was societal pressure to attend religious services. Even on high holy days and nights that is no longer the case.

So what is the reason you’ve come here? What drew you to this place tonight? What needs are you seeking to fill?

Have you come out of a sense of nostalgia? Are you here seeking, in some way, to recapture a more innocent time—a time when things seemed simpler, less threatening and uncertain? Perhaps you’ve come to stand once again in the place that was once familiar to you—a place that was home, in a way, to those members of your family who are no more. And so you have come to recapture something from the past.

Perhaps you have come because this is, after all, your church home. You have an active worship life and a healthy spirituality, and so there is no place you’d rather be on this night than here. Singing the great carols, surrounded by those you love and lighting a candle in the darkness as a sign of hope.

But I wonder how many of us have come tonight, if we are being honest, because at some level we are afraid? We feel anxious and uncertain—afraid, actually. We live in strange times. I am trying my level best to make sense of things and I am having a hard time.

As a pastor, and in talking to other clergy colleagues, large numbers of our congregants are expressing deep levels of anxiety and even fear over the state of our world where, as we know, all is not calm and all is not bright.

I don't know about you but I found Advent, those Sundays leading up to tonight, particularly poignant this year. The plea from prophets of old about crooked places being made straight and rough places smoothed out; or of Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, where she sings about the Lord scattering the proud and toppling the powerful from their thrones, while at the same time lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things—those ancient, prophetic promises resound with relevancy in today's world. They speak of ancient longings thousands of years ago, but also to the longings of troubled hearts today—of those who know that something is broken, something is not right, and something has to change.

And so I wonder if you have come to this place tonight seeking the very promises that came with this child's birth long ago? Because it was into just such a troubled world that a savior came. To a world in chaos and a people in great need, came one full of grace and truth. And so maybe you have really come tonight to reconnect with the story of this birth, and of what it represents and means for our lives and for the world.

That found in the one who rested in a Bethlehem manger, is one we dare call the Prince of Peace. Embedded in him and his life are the values and qualities this sad, broken world desperately needs. Our world on this night needs, like never before, more truth and greater love; it needs more grace and a deepening of compassion. Our world needs justice and more kindness; it needs humility and innocence, and wonder; and by God it needs hope, and all of that could be found in that manger long ago, and then in the person he grew to become.

The good news this Christmas is that it was all there that night and it's still here tonight.

Do you need to know this night that you are loved? Do you need to know that God loves you and accepts you, despite anything about you or whatever you may have been told?

Do you need to believe that despite the way our teetering world looks at the moment, with our institutions under attack, our political system reaching new lows and a heightened sense that nuclear war could actually be a possibility—do you need to know that there are reasons to be hopeful and optimistic?

Do you need the assurance that good is stronger than evil, that love is more powerful than hate, and that a light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it?

If your answer is yes, then you have come to the right place, because the celebration of Christ's birth affirms those very things. It affirms that in a world where Caesars and Herods strut and preen during their fifteen minutes of fame, real power resides elsewhere. The peddlers and propagators of fear do not have the last word, that belongs to the Word made flesh.

Know that real hope exists in the promises of God.

This winter world awaits a thawing—a thawing that will be ushered in when enough people allow the work of that Christ child to be born in them, to change them and motivate them to live for others and on behalf of this world that God so loves.

This is our challenge. This is our real need. This is also our hope. And I wonder if this is the reason you are here tonight? Amen.