

“Keeping Christmas”

Isaiah 63: 7-9

Rev. Julia A. Carlson

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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First Sunday after Christmas Day

Three years ago, tomorrow, my friend Eileen was visiting from Portland; you may have met her because she preached here for my installation. She has family in the Twin Cities and visits time to time. Three years ago, we went to Bon Vie for breakfast, to Great Harvest for a good, healthy sandwich for the plane ride home, and to the Cathedral because she'd never been.

A few days later, her husband had a heart attack and a few days after that he died. We agreed I would not go out for the funeral but that I would visit later on. As we planned for that visit, I said we needed to go out to breakfast. Through the years, she and Rick had a variety of favorite breakfast spots shared during a visit – it was a tradition. She said she hadn't been out to breakfast since Rick died and there was a particular place we had to go.

When we got to the restaurant, the staff clearly knew her, got us a table by the window and settled us with menus. When the waiter came over, we jabbered a bit, and ordered our tea. When the drinks came, she took a deep breath and told him Rick was gone. His immediate reply was: “We just had the baby. He's two weeks old.” Then he was able to say how sorry he was about Rick's death and then he reached out and Eileen stood, and they embraced.

On the way home we talked about that reaction – that need for hope when bad news hits. New life is always hopeful and particularly in the midst of death. Birth, after all, represents the future. We both appreciated his reaction – his holding on to good news in the midst of loss and pain.

It is a natural and life-giving reaction, but birth is the beginning of a story, not the whole of the story. Wanting to stay with the comfort and the hope, many people and many Christians, live from Christmas Eve and Easter only – but even as we wait for Epiphany (on January 6) which represents the arrival of the Magi on the church calendar, the lectionary pushes us out of our comfort zones.

While the Psalm for today is one of praise, the Hebrews passage offered by the lectionary was about being tested, suffering, and dying to destroy the power of the devil. The gospel for today is the story of Joseph's dream and the flight to Egypt which is followed by Herod's wrath and the so-called slaughter of the innocents. Herod had every male child aged 2 and under murdered to protect his power. So, I settled on the Isaiah, because at first glance, it seemed more appropriate to four days past a soul-stirring House of Hope Christmas Eve.

Buuuut, I was found out by Barbara Brown Taylor (not something one can ignore); she said of today's Old Testament reading, “Preachers who turn to Isaiah for a comforting word this Sunday will have to ignore everything they learned in seminary about interpreting a text in context, for these three verses are airlifted out of a chapter thick with divine wrath and human despair” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, 147, Homiletical.)

I'd carefully steered away from the gospel because I wanted to avoid the mention of 10,000 plus, children separated from parents by the United States. It would be nice not to mention that six have died and some, “a few” they say have been placed with sexual predators and trafficked. Children were separated from parents with no prepared plan for how they might be reunited – this is deplorable.

And looking elsewhere, Australia, they say, is on fire, perhaps killing as many as 30% of koalas. Sydney's water supply may be threatened and the heat index is expected to keep rising through New Year's. Meanwhile, some fracking companies are going bankrupt; as they close, they are walking away from whatever mess they've created rather than do the proper clean-up. And young people are daily in the streets in Iraq, Hong Kong, and now India to protest authoritarian governments that are killing off people of minority religions or have failed to fix economies so the next generation can find meaningful employment.

Even as the story of Christmas first unfolded, it did not black-out, change, or erase human evil. And the same is true today. None the less, Jesus is our story – we believe in the in-breaking of God, we believe the eternal took on flesh and lived in ordinary time – we believe God did this out of love and that through Incarnation, God demonstrated a way to live that promotes community, equality, and security for all people. We have promised to nurture this good in every way possible, because this is our hope. That is Christmas!

So, keeping Christmas is important, but keeping Christmas depends on what we believe Christmas really means.

In an online newsletter for millennial women (so of course I subscribe), D. L. Mayfield posted an article titled: "I watched the top ten Hallmark Christmas movies so you don't have to. Here's what I learned." At the end of her Hallmark binge, Mayfield concluded: "Of the top 10 films, every lead actor is white. Every relationship is heterosexual. Every career person is inferior to a family type. Every small town in America understands the world better than big city folks. Every family dispute can be solved by a big holiday dinner. Every person loves celebrating Christmas, regardless of their actual religion and traditions." Mayfield continued, "After the experience of watching good-looking people find noncontroversial love amid the background of snow and twinkly lights fades, the questions remain: Whom are these movies for, and what vision of the world are they upholding?" (the lily.com, 12/14/2019).

Her article was posted just before the on-again, off-again advertising for this year's new Hallmark movie that included the wedding and kiss of a gay couple. So we might add two more questions: Is the court of public opinion the way we will decide who is right and who is wrong, who is accepted and who is not? And is Hallmark creating an alternative gospel? It seems their viewership goes up in the fourth quarter ratings and the CEO says people crave their brand.

In our story, there is truth. And the truth is, there is evil. Naiveté will not save us. As on Christmas Eve and as with my breakfast in Portland with Eileen, new life is the sign and seal of hope – an obvious sign of God's saving presence but it's not God's only way of working. Like Jesus we need to grow up and into our powers – not powers to save but powers to discern and resist evil and choose the good even if the good brings us hardship. Everything is at stake here. We heard the NRSV this morning, I would like to re-read verses 8 & 9 and add in verse 10 but this time from the Common English Bible:

God said, "Truly, they are my people, children who won't do what is wrong." During all their distress, God also was distressed, so a messenger who served him saved them. In love and mercy God redeemed them, lifting and carrying them throughout earlier times. But they rebelled, and made God's holy spirit terribly sad, so that he turned into their enemy – he fought against them."

Here then is a challenge of keeping Christmas: resisting all of the enticements, bonuses, and swag that evil offers. King Herod was not an anomaly – he is alive and well in the racism built into the structures of our country and in white supremacy; in the fear we have of the stranger and the refugee, and in things like mass shootings, the disappearances of so many Native American girls, and the recent attacks and murders of transgender Americans. Unfortunately I could go on, but here is the key, if peace on earth is God's plan, if love and giving is God's way and being, then Christmas is not an event, it is a to-do list.

In another more recent conversation about a two-week old baby boy, one of you, a new grandfather, had an epiphany – a sudden awareness that every choice you make and all that you do will make his life better or worse. It came with the raw reality that none of us at the table will live until he is our age – but it gave absolute clarity that what we do now will affect his ability to live to our age and beyond. That is the call, to live for the other, for their comfort, their food and water supply, their home planet. And our challenge is to teach this faith, maybe without books or Sunday school, but by telling the stories and most importantly, living this story!

We tell this story and live it in baptizing Isabelle today; we are keeping Christmas for Malin, for Axton, Hayden, and Harrison. We are doing it for Owen and Jack. For Willa, Rosie, Ben, Alexander, Andrew, Jane, Cecily and James, the cradle roll and toddler room attendees at HOH. We need to keep Christmas, to reorient priorities and activities for the children in our lives and in our world.

Howard Thurman wrote a well-known poem titled “The Work of Christmas,” I am going to read that version later. This newer version was written more recently by Michael Dougherty:

When the carols have been stilled,
When the star-topped tree is taken down,
When family and friends are gone home,
When we are back to our schedules,
The work of Christmas begins:
To welcome the refugee,
To heal a broken planet,
To feed the hungry,
To build bridges of trust and not walls of fear,
To share our gifts,
To seek justice and peace for all people,
To bring Christ’s light to the world.
Amen.

The Charge:

The Work of Christmas by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angel is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost, to heal the broken,
to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.