



CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON

## How Christmas Comes

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DATE  
Christmas Eve  
Monday, Dec. 24, 2018

PREACHER  
The Rev. Jason Cox

Loving God, open our hearts this night to hear your Word being spoken. Amen.

This is the night, friends: Mary's time had come. It was not an easy journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in her condition, and just the worst time of the year to be on the road. In fact none of this had been easy — all the days of worry before the journey — what would Joseph say when he found out she was pregnant? But thank God, Joseph had stood by her, and now her time had finally come, in a strange city, with no family around to help, and the stable would have to do.

There wasn't a room in the inn — but honestly how could they have afforded that anyway? Money was hard to come by. The time of labor was here, she was breathing hard, working through the pain — and Mary was terrified.

The angel had told her not to be afraid, when he visited her. He said that she had found favor with God, that this child was a blessing and not a burden.

But even so: even though she had said yes, even though she was in fact willing to serve God in this way, still: she was filled with fear on this night, giving birth for the first time under such strange and harsh conditions. How could she feel otherwise? And where was that angel now, anyway?

As it happens, the angel, God's messenger, was out in the fields above Bethlehem, terrifying the shepherds. Like Mary and Joseph, these shepherds weren't sleeping inside that night: They were outside, guarding their sheep, and it was cold.

And then suddenly, out of nowhere, this terrifying Angel was confronting them, blazing with glory and nearly blinding them, and saying to them, like he had said to Mary, "Fear not!" Yeah, right. And then a whole multitude of otherworldly beings appeared, thousands of them, declaring God's intended peace for the earth.

Well — There hadn't been peace for the poor people of the earth for a long time; certainly not while the long arm of the Roman Empire reached out to control and manage and extract from its weak principalities — like Judea, where they lived.

What was this baby — born so poor he had no place to sleep but in a manger — what was he going to do in the face of Emperor Augustus and all the power of Rome?

Friends: we've heard this story before, we know what happens, and we are probably not terrified tonight, as Mary and the shepherds were. The trappings of Christmas are cozy, the opposite of terror and fear. But — maybe we should be afraid tonight. Because if Christmas really comes, the way we say we want it to, the way we hope it will, then things will have to change. We won't be able to go on as we have up until now. If Jesus is to be born tonight, then the world as we know it will have to die. God's Kingdom will come — here, on earth, as in heaven.

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And we have a choice, just as Mary did. We are not here merely to remember what happened so long ago on a cold night in Bethlehem. Like Mary, the Angel is asking us tonight: Will you bear Christ into the world? Will you carry Jesus in your heart? Will you work to build God's Kingdom in the here and now?

And what is that Kingdom meant to be? What vision does God have for this world — a vision that we're being asked to make real? Luke's Gospel is very clear on this question, and it can be summed up in just one sentence: in God's Kingdom, everyone has enough.

At first glance, I'm a little uncomfortable by the so-called good news the angels bring tonight. Listen to their proclamation again: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Peace — among those whom God favors. Why the restriction at the end? I mean, who is it that God favors? Isn't God's peace for everybody?

Luke is making an important point here — and frankly I doubt he would care if he makes some of us uncomfortable with this good news. Luke's point is this: God's peace is intended for those who don't yet have enough peace tonight, for those on the margins of society: God's coming peace is for the poor, the weak, the outcast. These are the ones God's peace is intended for tonight; these are the ones whom God favors.

How do we know this? Well, listen to the song Luke gives to Mary when she visits her cousin Elizabeth — in the middle of her pregnancy — Mary sings:

"God's mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
God has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty."

It doesn't stop there. Luke's gospel is relentlessly focused on concern for the poor. Only in Luke does John the Baptist say "whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none." Only in Luke does Jesus teach "whenever you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches "Blessed are the poor in spirit" — well, anybody could be poor in spirit; but Luke is concerned about people who are actually poor — in Luke Jesus says "Blessed are you who are poor" but "Woe to you who are rich."

And think again about the story we heard tonight: this holy family is so poor Mary must give birth in a barn. And you will find no Kings of Orient bearing costly gifts of incense and gold into Luke's stable — not even if you did wait until Epiphany. The Kings show up only in Matthew — and Matthew doesn't mention the shepherds at all. Why would he? Shepherds were the lowest of the low, dirty, living outside like the animals they took care of.

But according to Luke, it's just these drifters and vagrants to whom the heavens open up and God's glory is revealed. Luke makes it clear that these poor shepherds are the first to know that the world is about to change. After all — this is good news intended, specifically, for them.

Most of us here tonight are probably not part of the shepherd class. Even so — despite Luke's restrictions — I believe that God has good news for all of us — if we are willing to hear it. The thing that's hard for us to hear is that those of us who already have enough may be sent away empty tonight — as Mary put it in her song. But what you have to understand is that being sent away empty isn't a punishment — it's a blessing.

If we allow God to empty us out — then we will be blessed indeed, just as Mary was.

And what is it, exactly, that we need to be emptied of this year? What is the thing that's getting in the way of God being born in us? Our desire to be important? To have all the right things? To have more — more than we need?

What is it that occupies your heart this Christmas? Maybe it's sadness, frustration, anger? The feeling that you're not good enough or smart enough or kind enough? Or maybe you're lonely or afraid?

Whatever is in there, God wants to be in your heart, too. And if you let God in, even just a little bit: Watch out! All of those needless things will begin to fade. He has sent the rich away, empty.

It is only after we have been emptied out — of all the ridiculous things, all the needless stuff that gets in the way of God's love — only when we are emptied of these worries, these desires, are we then ready to be filled with the love of God.

Only when we are empty can Christ be born in us. Only when we are empty will Christmas come. We can sing the carols and put out the crèche, but unless we are willing to be emptied out, there won't be any place inside us for God to live.

This is the inside work, the thing that must happen inside our hearts, in order for the outside work to move forward. And the outside work is the building of the Kingdom of God. We are being asked to bear God into the world, as Mary did. And just like Mary, we know that this is not going to be easy, and it's going to change everything. Are we brave enough to do this thing — are we willing to be cast down, emptied out, so that God may be raised up?

This labor, this work of building God's Kingdom, will not be easy. But this is Christmas; and the time has come. Jesus is waiting to be born in us — not just tonight, but every day of our lives. His law is love, and his Gospel is peace. And it is up to us, now, to put flesh on those values — to incarnate God's love — and bring peace to those in this world who need it most.

Merry Christmas.