



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF THE INCARNATION, YEAR B, DECEMBER 24, 2020
ISAIAH 62: 6-12; PSALM 97; TITUS 3:4-7; LUKE 2:1-20

SIX WORDS OF GRATITUDE AND HOPE

***Luke 2:1-20** [And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria). And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.]*

The room at the deanery where I have done most of my Zoom meetings since March has a bookshelf directly opposite where I sit. On that shelf is a photo of our family, taken in the

late 1990s, when we went whitewater rafting on the Ocoee National River in the Smoky Mountains. This TVA river was the site for the 1996 Olympics' whitewater sports, and

for a few hours each day, the power company diverts water into a hydroelectric chute that sends water cascading down a stretch of riverbed to create a series of Class III and IV rapids that bear descriptive names like Diamond Splitter and Double Suck.

The day our family went rafting there was a cohort of foreign exchange students from Japan who arrived in the U.S. only the day before. This was their initial orientation to America, if you can believe it. They spoke very little English, and their river guide from Appalachia spoke no Japanese.

The guide in our boat took us through the initial rapids first so we could spot the others below. From our position downstream we watched as the raft carrying these young students eased toward the pinch point. We heard their guide yelling “all forward hard” which meant they all should paddle full on to create enough momentum to carry their raft through. That was lost in translation; and we watched as they met the turbulent waters by throwing their arms up and screaming, leaving insufficient speed to glide through. The boat flexed mid-raft, then boomeranged back flat, catapulting a few of the students into the water. That first set of rapids is known as “Slingshot.”

Personal protection equipment spared them any injury; we pulled them out of the water from our well-positioned rescue raft. The



second rapids did not bode much better, but then their foreign-exchange chaperone taught their raft guide a few key phrases in Japanese, and by the next rapids, all involved adapted sufficiently to make it through the run with no more unplanned expulsions.

The photo has served as a visio divina of sorts for me this year, 2020, when it seems like life has been a series of challenges, and there’s a prevalent sense of foreboding about “what’s next?” But, even so, intermingled with the fear and uncertainty we’ve all experienced, there have been joys and new discoveries as well—things learned about ourselves, each other, and our world.

And tonight we gather, albeit from a distance, and hear the Christmas story once more. We may want to hear it as uniformly sweet—the serene waters of a beautiful, easy birth—but if we are really honest, the story is not free of hardship and gloom.¹ It’s a timely story for us.

A census had forced Mary and Joseph to flee their familiar home and travel by foot 100 miles south to Bethlehem—Mary nine months pregnant no less, only to be told there was no room in the inn—a comical turn if not so utterly tragic. They were homeless, exhausted, and unwelcome. Mary and Joseph knew real fear that night, and there was no guarantee of a healthy baby swaddled into a manger.

The threat of civic violence rumbled outside the barn doors, and cows were lowing their distress signals that something was out of sorts—animals have always had that sixth sense.

Within days Mary and Joseph receive stomach-turning news that the tyrannical king seeks to kill their baby boy in an indiscriminate slaughter simply because he fears he might lose his seat on the throne. The holy family must flee to Egypt, an even longer desert journey, refugees for no reason other than their lives were not deemed valuable enough to save by the powers that be.

So rough is the story, we may have embellished it a bit through the centuries to soften its edges. I mean, what parents in their right minds would let a drummer boy awake the sleeping baby. The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes...I don't think so.

No, this is not some saccharine sweet fairy tale for Christians to tell each other that, despite your experiences in life to the contrary, everything really is just peachy. It isn't, and we need not pretend it is. The Christmas story can hold that weighty reality of life.

But neither is the story bereft of hope and delight. Shepherds bear witness to this truth—from their lowly station, they find reason to celebrate life and choose to share their joy with others. A caravan of immigrants from the East come to pay their respects also, guided by a planetary

convergence that served as a starry light of hope for them, in that moment. They just had to pay attention.

Such gifts of hopeful grace and connection have been part of the journey for us this year, too—experiences that have helped us find our bearings, and make our way...The New York Times collected more than 10,000 pithy testimonials of gratitude, limited to six words each, and published them on Thanksgiving Day. Here are a few such delights amidst the gloomy backdrop of a difficult year:

The crinkling eye above the mask.

Pandemic baby after years of trying.

Water cooler chats with my six-year-old son.

Windows have never been so important.

No shame in elastic-waist pants.

Ambulance took him; he came home.

Our kids after my wife died.

Healthcare workers. Healthcare workers.

Healthcare workers.ⁱⁱ

I wonder if you might devote some time this Christmas holiday to naming your own six-word statements of hope and gratitude and share them with others. May they be shining stars to guide you into a new year...

There's an ancient proverb that says "It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness." Christmas draws on such wisdom, and draws on the dark night as the locus of divine immanence. Mary and Joseph trusted that and invite us to as well.

Which is why we will conclude this service with the singing of Silent Night. Light a candle for that experience, turn down the incandescent glare of lightbulbs, let your eyes adjust to the aura of new birth emanating from a very difficult year, and know that God is there with you—has been all along.

Christmas does not deny the gloomy parts of life. It would make no sense really if it did. Christmas can hold it all, and hold us all, in its bosom of hope that God is up to something in all this. We need only believe that to give birth to something in our own

right—a nascent hope for a new year, a new world, a new way guided by the light of Christ in our lives.

Six words of gratitude and hope? Here are my thoughts this evening:

*For you—this community gathered tonight.
For swaddled babies and courageous
parents.*

For Christ's peace come to us...

For Christmas hope guiding the way.

*Merry Christmas, dear friends, Merry
Christmas.*

ⁱThis theme and some content is inspired by an essay written by Heidi Haverkamp [Lectionary column for December 24/25, Nativity \(Isaiah 9:2-7; John 1:1-14\) \(christiancentury.org\)](#)

ⁱⁱhttps://messaging-custom-newsletters.nytimes.com/template/oakv2?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20201126&instance_id=24498&nl=the-morning&productCode=NN®i_id=79414249&segment_id=45480&te=1&uri=nyt%3A%2F%2Fnewsletter%2F893cada1-de5f-5c69-b15e-c3969d16852a&user_id=13d8a08c6f7776fb7df43bea0d44513c



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