

Christmas Eve  
December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019

**PRAYER:** O God, place your trumpet in our hands, and we will make a mighty sound! For unto the world a child is born; unto the world a Saviour is given. His hands will split the yoke of our burdens; his knee will snap the rod of our afflictions. He will establish peace upon the earth, breaking the bow and shattering the spear.

You have struck a spark, Lord. The refiner's fire is kindled in the darkness; an ember glows in the silent night. Unto the world a child is born; unto the world a Saviour is given. Place your trumpets in our hands, and we shall call the world to peace!

**OFFERTORY SENTENCE:** "And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshipped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." (Matt. 2:11) Let us follow the Magi's example and honour the Christ child with our gifts.

**BLUE CANDLE INTRODUCTION:** Now is the time in the service when we take a few moments to remember that this festive season can be difficult for many people. Most often the memories Christmas stirs up remind us of those who we have loved who had meant so much to us, and who are now in the eternal hands of God. At the very center of our being is an awareness of an end to a valued relationship. Our hearts ache, our tears flow. We grieve because of their physical absence, but we also rejoice to have known that love.

We also light this blue candle together as a reminder that we do not stand alone in our grief. All around us this evening are brothers and sisters in Christ who share our pain and long to give comfort. In trying to rebuild our lives after our loss, God has provided us with a rich and diverse community from which we can derive hope, strength and love. Together we shall experience the grace God extends to us, in the full recognition that we are never alone. Let us now light our blue candle to remind us of the warmth and light that our fellowship brings to all of us especially those who walk through the shadow this Christmas. Let us now light our blue candle.

**BLUE CANDLE PRAYER:** Gracious, Compassionate God, even as we celebrate the joyous news of your Son's birth, we recognize that not every heart is finding rejoicing easy or even possible. For some, the sting of death and loss is so recent that our hope and assurance are threatened. Embrace us this evening, O God. Hold us close. Dispel the gloomy clouds that have overshadowed us. Grant us a peace that only you can give. And thank you, O God that we do not journey through these dark moments alone. Not only do you walk with us, but we walked together as a community. As one of us grieves, we all grieve. When one rejoices, we all rejoice. May the light of this candle, remind us that your Spirit is the true light of our souls. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O God, we have waited long in the fields of the night, keeping watch over the flocks, looking for signs of the morning. And what a sign you have given! The birth of a child! The birth of a Saviour! The birth of new life! Through your tender mercy, a new day has dawned, giving light to us who sit in darkness and dwell in the shadow of death, revealing the path of righteousness and guiding our feet unto the way of peace.

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This child who has been born among us-he is the one with whom you are well pleased. And he has been born not among the mighty, but the lowly; not among the ruling, but those that are ruled; not among the rich, but the poor; not among the favoured, but the outcast.

If we are honest with you, he is not the Messiah we had expected from you, Lord. But there is the star dancing above him, and there is the angelic choir singing overhead: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace!" All creation celebrates the sign that has come to the nations, the salvation that has come to the peoples. The darkness has been broken; how can we doubt? The dawn is here; how can we not view the world in a different light?

We have run from the fields to see this thing that has happened; we have seen with our eyes-help us to understand with our hearts! O God, help us to know the time of our visitation, so that when the child, becomes a man, we might by his grace draw near to your heart and our eternal hope. In drawing us close by your Son, keep us safe, we pray from breaking your heart. May our lives draw their strength, their purpose and their hope from the one who came at Bethlehem and whose birth we rejoice and celebrate this night. Turn our weeping into rejoicing and may we truly learn the power of knowing for ourselves the Prince of Peace. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:** Somewhere in the night of our lives, a baby cries, and that cry is our hope. The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of the world. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace!

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Sermon Series: God's Christmas Gifts.  
Part V: "The Greatest Gift of All!"

In a little barber shop, a young boy was getting his hair cut, as his father observed and sat waiting for him. As his locks fell, the young boy was intently focused on the little Christmas tree the barber had set up in his shop to celebrate the season. Finally, the young boy said to his father, "Daddy, how come we don't have a Christmas tree?" With gentleness the father replied, "Jewish houses do not have Christmas trees."

The boy pondered this answer and then with a frown replied, "Well, why did we have to buy a Jewish house?" I think I can understand the young boy's heart on this matter. He understood from looking around him that something special was going on, and also concluded that for some reason he wasn't involved and neither was his family. He was in a word, missing out. There is, I believe, in the back of our minds a funny little thought.

At least it is a thought I have had several times as I experience our multicultural country. At this time of year, I am glad I celebrate Christmas. I also confess some sadness that people of other religions don't experience the excitement and pleasure this season brings. Of course, they also miss most of the headaches of this season too. What with all the preparations, crowds at the malls, and trying to get along with our families.

Still, I do worry that I take just a bit too much pleasure in the fact that I have something others refuse to have, or like the little Jewish boy in the story, are not permitted to have. In my experience, I know of no other night in the calendar that contains as much anticipation and excitement as this one. Thanksgiving doesn't have it. We have excitement maybe on the night before our own birthdays, but not like Christmas Eve.

As important as Easter is, and it is in my mind the most significant Christian holiday, there isn't the anticipation that Christmas brings. The Easter Bunny just can't hold a candle to Santa Clause. Is it safe to say that no matter our age, all of us will prepare for sleep tonight, wondering what surprises the Christmas day will bring?

For children of all ages, there will be a building of hope that someone, either Santa or a loved one, managed to purchase and wrap that must have gift for us. With this in mind, I have concluded that Christmas is a season of hope. Certainly, we hope for certain gifts, but I believe we also hope for peace, goodwill, and a happy, memory filled, family gathering. Generally, we hope for a wonderful day. And considering the chronic needs of humanity, perhaps hope is the one thing we need more than anything else.

The gift of Christ Jesus at Christmas is a gift of hope. In this ancient story, we find our hopes fulfilled. That is by its very definition what faith is all about. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, "*What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.*" (Hebrews 11:1)

The coming of Christ, the incarnation of God, is provided to us as assurance. The Nativity is proof that we have not hoped in vain.

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The Nativity story is an assurance that God: cares for us, loves us and desires reconciliation with his people. It is the assurance that when in this life we most need hope, God communicates with the “Word made flesh”, that he has been there, done that and is right here with us. It is the assurance that God looks at every corner of this world, throughout all of time and he declares that he loves us.

It is the assurance that no matter how lost we feel, how far away from our beloved Creator we may have wandered, God has provided us a way back. And to prove this, God did something extraordinary. Stepping from his throne, he removed his robe of light and took on flesh. The Great Big King of the universe entered the small, dark, wet encumbrance of a womb.

I am sure that Mary and Joseph must have wondered, at least once in that stable, about what God was up to. The answer it seems is that God is communicating the greatest truth of all. That there is nothing, in this world, that can make God stop loving us. Nothing! As the Apostle Paul wrote, “There is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8)

To prove this truth God states by his actions, *“Watch me speak your language, sleep on your earth, feel your hurts. Behold the maker of sight and sound as he sneezes, coughs, and blows his nose. You wonder if I understand how you feel? Look into the eyes of the dancing kid in Nazareth; that’s God walking to school. Ponder the toddler at Mary’s table; that’s God spilling his milk.”* (Max Lucado: When God Whispers Your Name)

Christmas is God’s way of shouting to the world, “Whatever you experience, I’ve experienced as well.” When you cry, laugh, suffer from pain, experience a relationship problem, loose a job, or get an unwelcome diagnosis from a doctor, God is there and he knows how you feel. Our pain is his pain, our grief is his grief, our joy is his joy and our life is his life.

Perhaps that is really what I am experiencing, when I am saddened by those who know not the joy of this season. I wonder where their hope is. Who walks with them through the dark times of life? It is not just Christmas trees they are missing out on, but the assurance that there is a loving God who gave his all to reach us. Our faith has been satisfied.

In the birth of Jesus, we have the assurance of all that we hoped for and we have the evidence of things unseen. What greater gift can there be than this?