

Christmas 2020 — Messed Up, but Not Ruined

Christmas Eve — December 24, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

(Worship Aids follow the text of the message on page 4.)

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

What a year this has been! Christmas is usually seen as a time to put a good ending on a year, whether that has been a good year or a bad one, but this year's troubles won't

even allow us to have the celebration we really want! And so, for Christmas Eve, I speak to a video camera in an empty sanctuary. What are we to make of this year and the Christmas celebration with which it concludes? Some say Christmas is ruined. That is harsh. It is, however, certainly messed up! It would probably help us all to pause and assess the damage and to try to gain a little perspective on it all.

Yes, this has not been an enjoyable year for most of us. It has been bad, but it could have been worse. The damage done by 2020 is plain for all to see: illness and losses of friends and loved ones, businesses and livelihoods lost and threatened, and the isolation and anxiety. Is there anyone who has not been affected by this virus? And yet we look back to 1918 and a far worse flu which took countless victims, mostly from the young to the very young. Bad as things are, they could have been worse. As we learn to do in life, we tell ourselves to make the best of the situation, and this is good advice. We too easily become married to notions of “a perfect Christmas.” Many of us have dozens of expectations of what makes for our perfect Christmas, and if some family tradition is not honored, then all is lost! This is the year to put aside notions of “a perfect Christmas” and to be ready to adapt to something different. Let us be open to blessings that this year’s celebration might bring. Most of us can remember times when we could not celebrate Christmas as we would have liked. Perhaps we were away in military service or at school. When we are open to the celebrations and new families wherever we find ourselves, we are usually surprised by much joy! Christmas is also a time to be glad for whatever we have, for we are a richly blessed people.

Yet having said all this, we truly face a devastating time. Christmas is when we celebrate “God and sinners reconciled” as Christ came to bring us back into relationship with our Heavenly Father and with each other. It was God’s plan from the beginning that we live in close fellowship with each other, and with God, and Christmas was when Jesus came to restore that closeness. Now we are to celebrate this great work of reconciliation by staying apart! This separation of quarantine and shutdown is an extremely harsh medicine that we have accepted in the cause of defeating this virus. I cannot help but wonder if those great authorities who so freely and glibly make mandates that we separate from one another have any idea just how much harm they are inflicting upon us. In this year our spirits have been genuinely wounded and we continue to bear the pains of isolation.

We gain a sense of perspective as we consider all the dynamics of this pandemic, but even greater insight is gained as we remember that Christmas some 2,000 years ago. We often try to make our Christmas celebration into “a perfect day.” Let us remember how perfect that first Christmas was. One could say that there were a few glitches in that great event! First there was the matter of the pregnant girlfriend, and a whole town which was whispering about this scandal. Then came the great census and the mandated journey to Bethlehem from far away Nazareth. When the time of Jesus’ birth came, they were not prepared, at least in the matter of a decent lodging. Joseph

and Mary were mere peasants and could not afford to find a better accommodation. The night of Christ's birth concluded with a strange visit from a band of flea infested shepherds. This was not "the perfect day"!

One can hardly begin to grasp the bewilderment of Mary and Joseph. The world had certainly gone crazy for them. They were far from home and overwhelmed by it all. This is a year when we can all feel a special understanding for the Holy Family as we sort through the bewilderment of our Christmas in this strange and painful year. What sustained them? The first answer is that God spoke to them and they followed in faith. This is a good start, but there is much more to this answer. God guided and affirmed them along the way. At moments they must have looked back and entertained doubts about the angelic messages they received. But now the shepherds spoke, affirming by their divine revelation that God was indeed in control of this whole event. We too follow in faith, and if we are attentive, we find divine encouragements and words of hope to keep us strong on our way.

Christmas, then and now, has been messed up and confused, but for those with eyes to see we can recognize that Christmas is, and always shall be, beautiful and full of wonder! The Messiah is born! As the angels proclaimed: *Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.* A special child has been born and we are saved. We, like these honored parents, can now claim a beautiful Child as our own and know that because of this Child we have a glorious hope.

As the shepherds, those most unlikely prophets of God, affirmed, God is working out a marvelous plan, and He is very much in control. They were told to look for a baby in a manger, and who would have known this except for God? They were told of a swaddled child, which is in one respect an unremarkable thing to be told. That would be like telling a modern person to look for a child in Pampers diapers and wrapped in a baby blanket. But the swaddling cloths were a sign of this Child's destiny—to die for the sins of the world and to be wrapped in burial cloths and placed in a grave, and then to be raised in victory. God's plan was unfolding and it would not be stopped! May we delight in the beauty and wonder of this plan and follow as Mary and Joseph did.

This may not be the Christmas for which we had hoped, but Christ is born and we are saved! Celebrate the Savior, for He has come. And let us, in this year of bewilderment, gain a new and deeper appreciation for the bewilderment faced by the Holy Family. Let us follow in faith to a glorious future. Merry Christmas.

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A Prayer of Preparation for Christmas:

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the holy gift you gave us when You stooped down to our world to place in the arms of a mother the gift of Your Son. We confess that by our sin we insult His innocence. By our doubts we mock His trust of Your Word. By our selfishness we make light of His sacrifice. Forgive us, and renew in us trust in Your love and grace through Your most holy Son.

Hallow this night, Lord, that it may be Your holy night for us. Help us hear Your Word, that we may no longer live in fear. Lead us to listen to the Gospel, Your Good News, that we may know Your Son born to us: the Savior, Christ the Lord. Open our hearts to hear the mighty choirs sing of all Your promises, that we may see Your glory in the highest in Christ's humble birth, and Your peace for us and for all people in His lowly coming. Let Him who once was born be born anew in us this night. Amen.

A Christmas Prayer:

Let your goodness, Lord, appear to us, that we, made in your image, conform ourselves to it. In our own strength we cannot imitate your majesty, power and wonder nor is it fitting for us to try. But your mercy reaches from the heavens, through the clouds, to the earth below. You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms, and pierce our hearts with your soft sweet cries.

—Bernard of Clairvaux, 1090-1153

The Benediction:

May God the Father, who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son, give you grace to prepare for eternal life.

May God the Son, who comes to us as Redeemer and Judge, reveal to you the path from darkness to light.

May God the Holy Spirit, by whose working the Virgin Mary conceived the Christ, help you bear the fruits of holiness. —Michael Perham