

Christmas Eve 2018 Sermon

Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

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.

When did you start this year's Christmas preparations?

Some Christmas ads appeared before Halloween, beckoning us to begin shopping early. If you are good at planning ahead, perhaps *that's* when you started your preparations for Christmas – back in October. For many of us, **Thanksgiving** marks the time when we start putting up decorations and perhaps avail ourselves of the Black Friday sales to buy our Christmas gifts.

In the **Church**, we started our preparations for Christmas on Dec. 2, the First Sunday of Advent. These past four weeks we have read Scriptures telling us of waiting, expectation, and preparation. We put blue hangings on our altar, and we

lit the candles on the Advent wreath, the light *inside* the church slowly growing while *outside* the days grew darker.

But now the time of preparation is over. There are no more shopping days left.

The day *before* the start of Advent, Dec. 1, we held a Quiet Day – a kind of mini-retreat. Our retreat leader, Tom Stella, told us that there are really *three* Christmases: There is our culture’s Christmas, characterized by hectic activity and “shop ‘til you drop;” there is the religious Christmas, wherein we in the church observe all the rituals appropriate to the season – Advent colors and Advent wreath for the first 4 Sundays of December, then finally the Christmas poinsettias and other decorations we see tonight. But besides the cultural Christmas and the religious Christmas, there is – even more importantly – the **spiritual** Christmas, for which we prepare in a very *different* way: by emptying ourselves *of* ourselves, slowing down, quieting the noise around us and within us: Silent night, holy night; let every heart prepare him room.

In order to arrive at this *spiritual* Christmas, we have to do the most difficult thing that can be asked of folk in our culture, and that is: to do nothing. To do nothing. Our busy – for many of us *hectic* – preparations are over, and there is nothing left to do. So, I invite you to approach this night with open hands and receptive hearts. For this night is **not** about *our efforts*, but about *God’s gift*.

Have you heard the story of the New York businessman who visited the South for the first time? He flew into the Atlanta airport early in the morning and decided to have breakfast at one of the airport restaurants. He ordered ham and eggs, but when the waitress delivered the order, there was something additional on the plate. He inquired, “What is this white glob here on my plate?” The waitress said, “Those are grits.” “But I didn’t *order* grits,” he said; and she replied, “You don’t order grits. They just come!”

We don’t order a spiritual Christmas. We don’t order grace. We don’t order God. God just comes, unbidden, silently. The announcement of the Incarnation of God came unexpectedly and without warning to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds. We don’t order Christ’s birth, nor do we control it. All we can do is receive it.

The spiritual Christmas is all about giving and receiving – **God’s** giving, and *our* receiving. If God is the archetype, the supreme model, for *giving*, **Mary** is the archetype – our model – for *receiving*. We see this most clearly if we look back 9 months before Jesus’ birth, when the Angel Gabriel appeared to a frightened young virgin Mary to tell her that God had chosen her to give birth to God’s Son. Some ancient legends say that all the angels of heaven were looking down from the clouds and whispering, “Say yes, Mary! Say yes!” And Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”¹ Fr. Richard Rohr notes: “It takes the entire Bible to work up to one perfect vessel that knows how to say an unquestioning yes to an utterly free gift.”²

That consent, that “yes” spoken by Mary nine months before the birth, is the **starting** point for our celebration of this night. Christmas would never have happened without Mary’s “yes” to the angel, without her consenting, “Let it be with me according to your word.” She lets *God* do all the giving. *Her* job is to **receive** God. And

Mary’s total vulnerability and receptivity to God is **our** model for receiving the gift of Christ *tonight*.

It has been said that “Faith does not wish, hope, or desire -- faith **receives**.”³ Wishing, hoping, desiring – **these** were the themes of Advent; their time has passed. Tonight is the moment of faith, the moment to receive.

And as I have grown older, I have come to learn that faith receives what *is*. Faith doesn’t focus on what is not, what is wrong, or what is lacking. Faith *receives*, and receiving and judging are *opposite* stances. The spirit of faithful receptivity does not spend time and energy deriding our society’s commercialization of Christmas; instead, it **receives** the flickers of good will that radiate here and there in the very midst of the glitz of television ads, internet ads, Santa Claus, and Walmart displays. A receiving spirit does not spend time and energy judging other people’s Christmas traditions or gifts; it sees the spark of kindness and generosity that is *there*, at some level, in each tradition, each gift, despite the fact that it may be somewhat tainted by human self-centeredness and selfishness. The spirit of faithful receptivity doesn’t judge the mixed motivations or appropriateness of a particular gift given on Christmas Day; it sees **each** gift in the larger, more profound context of the all-encompassing gift of the Christ-child which permeates and suffuses **all** that happens at Christmas – intended, invited, or not.

Isaiah wrote, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is **given**.” (9:6) *Freely* given – unbidden, unearned, undeserved.

So, we are called tonight to **do nothing** – nothing but receive that gift which is God’s very self.

“For *to you* is born this day a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.”

Open your heart and receive the gift!

AMEN

1 Luke 1:38

2 Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008, pp. 31-32)

3 Ord Morrow, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 33, no. 2.

(The inspiration for this sermon, and some of its words, come from “Yours For The Asking”, *Deep Joy For A Shallow World*, Richard A. Wing, CSS Publishing, Lima, Ohio, 2001)