

Christmas 2016
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A Christmas Sermon I Want to Hear

We gather on this holy night for our annual celebration of the birth of Jesus. It was the angel that proclaimed to shepherds in the fields: (Luke 2:10-11) "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. The world needs good news. We need good news. And Christmas comes each year and offers us a way to believe again in hope, peace and joy.

In the Bible, names carry meaning, and Jesus' name means simply, "God saves." Jesus is the Savior of the world. As Moses before him saved those who lived in captivity in Egypt and led them to a Promised Land, God's sight and purpose was much broader and lasting with birth of the Christ child: all the world would be saved -- not just the chosen, the good, the knowing, the holy, but all, now and forever.

God saves -- a good thing, right? Someone who has fallen overboard is thrown a life preserver to save them. A hiker loses their way in the forest and search parties are quickly organized to search and save her. We admire the heroism of a first responder who runs into a burning building to save those trapped inside.

You may have heard that this past week Dr. Henry Heimlich died at the age of 96. Dr. Heimlich is credited with saving thousands of people from choking to death, thanks to the method he invented in 1974. The good doctor actually used the maneuver at his retirement home this past year when a woman began choking.

People helping and trying to save others from harm or distress makes sense. How about God saving us?

Why then does the phrase "God saves" carry with it so much weight and baggage? For me it goes to my years I spent in the South in my college years -- at the very edge of the Bible Belt -- that taught me to be on guard and ready to defend myself if anyone asked me if I were "saved." Because I knew what they were really asking. "Are you saved? Born Again? Do you believe the Bible to be literal and true? Do you know Jesus the way we know Jesus?" Is he your personal Lord and Savior? It always felt more like a test than a genuine question.

On the subject of saving, let me try to save you from something else this evening. My source is the blog post by Lutheran pastor Erik Parker entitled "11 Christmas Eve sermons that often get preached, but we don't want to hear."

Parker contends that before the congregation “can hold the candles and sing Silent Night, the pastor is going to ramble on for a while. What is the preacher going to say this year?” people wonder.

So as I ramble on these are the sermons Parker suggests I avoid. There is the “come to church sermon and the come back to church sermon.” This is the risky strategy of targeting the less frequent churchgoer into checking in more often. Trust me: not a good idea. There’s the “Jesus is the reason, so Santa is not” sermon – the sermon that, makes a person feel bad for even mentioning poor Santa’s name around children. It’s O.K. Santa is fine by me. And then there’s the “magic of Christmas” sermon. This one suggests that this night is all about feelings and nostalgia, painting a cozy picture of a Norman Rockwell Christmas with perhaps a story thrown in from the preacher’s childhood. There’s the lecture sermon with a lot a religious words, and then there is the anti-consumerism sermon that leaves everyone feeling ashamed for buying any gifts at all.

Such pressure. Christmas Eve sermons should be simple yet meaningful, relevant and timeless, inspire but not be too heavy or depressing.

What is the message tonight then? God saves.

It starts by looking where we least expect things to happen in our lives. God continues to show up unannounced and in surprising ways to stop us in our tracks and make us reconsider the gift that is our lives.

In Isaiah’s time God made this promise: the yoke of the people’s burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors, would be broken.

But how? For those long ago who thought God would send down armies more powerful than those that occupied Bethlehem the night Jesus was born, they would be disappointed. For those who hoped for a revolution from within to topple the powerful, they too would be disappointed.

In the Christmas story, shepherds are given front row seats to the event that changed everything. And yet they were people who had no power or influence in Jesus’ day. They were at the bottom of the ladder of success, yet they were given a prized view.

The Apostle Paul wrote: But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are. 1 Corinthians 1:27-28

God chose a different way to save us and show the world out of darkness. Out of exile back home. Out of the shadows into the light. Out of loneliness into community. Out of sin into healing. Out of death into life.

The way out and the way forward comes through a child. Isaiah 9:6 And a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

To be saved, we are invited to make room and space in our lives for the power of weakness, service, humility, tenderness, innocence, vulnerability, compassion, openness, forgiveness and trust.

Our world has many challenges, as it did on the night Jesus was born. Our work – and it is work -- is not to overcome by them, or depressed at turns of events, or hopeless at the news of endless wars or tragedies. Certainly we cannot afford to check out and ignore what is going on beyond our families, homes and comfortable communities.

Once we believe in our hearts that we are worthy of God's saving, we are asked to lend a hand. To heal and mend the world.

The Spanish mystic Teresa of Ávila reminds us:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

So let us join the Light that overcomes all darkness. And may God save us all.