

Peace On Earth, Good Will To All Mankind

The United Methodist Church 'Don't overlook the humble birth in a tumultuous world'

As I sit down at my computer to write this message, the sky has become overcast and a few snowflakes are trying to fall. The temperature is around 35°. Earlier the sun shone and the skies were clear. Last night the temperature was 52°. The weather seems unsettled and unsure of what it should be doing. Is it Winter, Fall or Spring? It somehow doesn't seem like Christmastime.

Many people I have spoken with exhibit the same ambivalence the weather seems to be demonstrating. Something seems out of joint, off-balance, not-quite-right. It has become almost commonplace to blame the events of September 11th and following for this mood of portentous uncertainty and unease. Commonplace as such observations may be, they are probably accurate. If the Christmas story teaches us anything, it is to look for the truth about our lives in common places. The times now may very well be pregnant with truths we need to hear about ourselves and our world.

But where shall we look for such truths? Should we voraciously scan the news reports hoping to discern the hand of God in current events? Should we wrap ourselves in the comforting thought that our cause is just and ignore the possible consequences of national policies? Should we raise money for refugees and orphans, but never learn to pronounce their names or the names of their homelands? What are we to make of the events and headlines of the year 2001? Where and for what should we look?

Charles Swindoll suggests that we look for a moment at the events of another momentous year: 1809. The international scene was tumultuous. Napoleon was sweeping through Austria; blood was flowing freely. Nobody then cared about babies. But the world was overlooking some terribly significant births.

For example, William Gladstone was born that year. He was destined to become one of England's finest statesmen. That same year, Alfred Tennyson was born to an obscure minister and his wife. The child would one day greatly affect the literary world in a marked manner. On the American continent, Oliver Wendell Holmes was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And not far away in Boston, Edgar Allan Poe began his eventful, albeit tragic, life. It was also in that same year that a physician named Darwin and his wife named their child Charles Robert. And that same year produced the cries of a newborn infant in a rugged log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky. The baby's name? Abraham Lincoln.

If there had been news broadcasts at that time, I'm certain these words would have been heard: "The destiny of the world is being shaped on an Austrian battlefield today." But history was actually being shaped in the cradles of England and America. Similarly, everyone thought taxation was the big news -- when Jesus was born. But a young Jewish woman cradled the biggest news of all: the birth of the Savior.

So where do we look? While the headlines focus upon the activities of governments, presidents, prime ministers, generals and intelligence operatives, the scriptures suggest that we need to look for God's activity in the common places, in common hearts and ordinary lives.

As I write these closing words, the weather has changed again. Twenty miles away the weather is different from where I sit. The winds of politics and history will also continue to shift as well. But one thing will remain constant: the light will continue to shine forth from humble places.

May we turn our faces toward that light: Jesus Christ. The light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. It's suddenly beginning to feel more like Christmas.

-The Rev. Craig S. Strobel

Heppner Christian Church 'Through The Eyes Of A Child'

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:8-20 NIV)

I have been taking some classes for further education and my professor remarked about this passage out of Luke. He noted that it was not the wise men who saw Jesus from the first but some shepherds out in the field, keeping their sheep. He pondered on the significance of what is written in the Gospel of Luke. He then remarked to the class something I think we adult and educated folks need to hear. He said, "The common man and the uneducated and the children have beat the wise and the educated and the great people of the world to Jesus. After we find out that the hope, joy, and peace of life are not in greatness or education or wealth, we find our way to Jesus and there are the children and uneducated and common people who new better than we were to find the reason for the season.

The Bible says in Galatians, "...but when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a virgin." Many wise people have spoken and said, "What a quaint little story for children, but we are wise and know that no help comes from the child." Only to discover that the only help did and has come from Jesus. This Christmas I hope that each one of us would take a fresh look at the child and maybe look close with not the eyes of our wealth, education, or greatness but with the wonder of a child at discovering the greatest gift God could give. I hope and pray that each of you would have a very wonderful Christmas and a happy new year. And may the love of Jesus be found in both for you.

-Pastor Andrew Johnson

All Saints Episcopal/Hope and Valby Lutheran Churches 'Look to Jesus, not Santa, to fulfill God's promises'

Before I get started let me begin by saying "hello" to everyone within the Morrow County area. I am Pastor Laura Snyder, and I am serving

Valby Lutheran Church, All Saints Episcopal Church and Hope Lutheran Church. So, if you see a new face in the area it just might be mine.

Just last Friday night I drove into Heppner with my U-Haul having traveled from Dubuque, Iowa. Needless to say, during the trip I had a lot of time to think. There really isn't much to do or see between Iowa and Oregon and the scenic void had to be filled with something - anything! So, because it is almost Christmas I gave a lot of thought to the upcoming holiday season. This wasn't because of any piety on my own part, but because numerous radio stations were playing Christmas songs. It is quite hard to think of anything other than Christmas when Bruce Springsteen is singing "Santa Claus is Coming to Town."

What became apparent during my travels is that somehow Santa has replaced Jesus in our lives. Most of the Christmas songs sing about Santa coming into the world spreading Christmas cheer and peace on earth. Granted, this isn't a profound thought, or even a new thought for that matter, but let me add a twist to the plot. Santa isn't just an advertising ploy for a materialistic society, but Santa has moved to the role of savior. This jolly old man in a red suit brings peace to all the earth by delivering presents to those who have been nice all year. In doing this Santa promotes happiness and good will towards all.

For some reason it is easier to place our hope in a fable that only promises one night of very conditional gifts for good behavior; rather than the God who gives us unconditional love and forgiveness. The gift God gives us is with us always in the birth of God's only Son, the baby Jesus, which is why the Gospel of John tells us that "God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son." The birth of Jesus is the only gift that can and does fulfill the promises that we look to Santa for. Jesus is peace on earth and good will towards all. So with that have a very merry Christmas and a wonderful holiday season.

-Pastor Laura Snyder

St. Patrick's and St. William's Catholic Churches 'Holy Day or Holiday?'

Perhaps we have all come to expect that immediately after Thanksgiving there will be a consumer bonanza. The stores expect it, and they begin their Christmas advertising and sales. Great bargains are offered to encourage people to get started. Christmas music is played on t.v. shows, in stores; the t.v. shows build stories around Christmas; people decorate their homes with lights, the atmosphere becomes festive as Santa Claus roams everywhere. The holiday spirit becomes so prevalent that we could easily lose sight of the Holy Day we want to celebrate. Perhaps by the time Christmas arrives, the carols have ceased to be meaningful for us. Consequently,

some people think that consumerism has taken over and the real significance of Christmas lost. It need not be so.

When we see the nativity scene we can recall that St. Francis put a living creche (cradle) together with live people and animals in 1223. His intention was to celebrate the incarnation in a special way. He wanted people to remember that the Christ Child had been born in Bethlehem. So also for us, as we look upon that scene, we can recall the goodness of God who gave his Son to mankind. That scene can conjure up for us thoughts of the infinite love of Jesus for each one. So, the commercialism and the multiplication of nativity scenes could be a powerful reminder to us of the real meaning of Christmas, not just on Sunday at Church, but in stores and streets

When we see Santa Claus we could recall that he emerged in popular culture from St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas was a bishop of Myra in the fourth century. He was reputed to be kindly and a giver of gifts to others, especially to children. The custom of giving gifts comes from the gifts brought by the Magi to the Christ Child. So, when we give gifts we might want to be aware that we are giving a gift to someone who is a child of God. The gift that we give could be a gift from the heart - a book, video, magazine that will be inspiring to the receiver; the gift of forgiveness to someone from whom we have been alienated; the gift of encouragement to someone who is depressed.

The beauty of the HOLY DAY of Christmas is that it does not end of the 25th of December. Rather December 25th is the beginning. It is the beginning of a new focus on life, a life inspired by our Savior.

-Fr. Gerry Condon.

Heppner Christian Missionary Fellowship 'God is with us even in a time of darkness'

The Holiday Season is here again. The lights are up, the people are busy getting their shopping done. Homes are filled with the smells of Christmas baking and songs. It's a time of loving and giving. All because of Jesus, Emanuel, God with us!

Even in this time of darkness, a time of war, He is the light that lights our lives. He is an ever-present help in the time of trouble. He is our hiding place.

If you do not know Him ... Today is the day of salvation. If you will seek Him with all of your heart you will find Him. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. He came that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

May each of you have a Wonderful Christmas and may all of us in Heppner be mindful of His love. For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life.

-Pastor Lynda L. Crane

Ione United Church of Christ 'Daring to Hear the Christmas Story'

I love to see the little angels in the Christmas programs. On the scale of cuteness, they are second only to the occasional wayward lambs. I love to see the young Mary and Joseph, and there is something profoundly beautiful about hearing young voices successfully negotiate the old language and adult-oriented concepts of the Christmas story. Someday, perhaps, they will grow into the mature faith which is represented in the strange words they memorize.

In the story that we have the children tell, the original main characters were mostly adults, except perhaps some young shepherds doing adult work on the night shift, the mother who was barely more than a child, and the infant in the manger. The story took place on a winter's night in the unheated places of an overcrowded town, and in the open fields of the surrounding countryside, not in the comfort of a heated sanctuary. The Christmas stories in the Bible do not say what the angels looked like,

beyond saying that the glory of the Lord shone around them. I imagine them not as cute but as strong, beautiful and magnificent. They inspired fear and awe, not smiles and "awww..."

It is reassuring to hear the traditional words recited by different children each year as they grow into their parts. For an evening, the world seems like it is as it should be, and as it always has been.

Yet those same words point to the birth of Christ as an event which changes the world forever, and as the beginning of the transformation of our own lives. Simeon praised God when he saw the child, and said, "My eyes have seen your salvation!" He then said to Mary, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts will be revealed." How would you like to hear those words spoken to you, as you hold your child?

If we dare to listen fully and hear the Christmas story as the awesome news that God is taking the essential part in the human story - and therefore in the story of our own lives - then perhaps we will comprehend the strength and the necessity of the words of God's magnificent messengers:

"Do not be afraid, for 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 Christ the Lord!"

-The Rev. Paul Clay

Heppner Nazarene Church 'St. Nicholas embodies the spirit of giving'

Recently I was contemplating the events of the Christmas season. It seems that our culture has become very commercialized with sales, buying frenzies, decorating blitzes, Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer and Santa Claus. Oh, yes I know that we all adore Santa. But what happened to original foundation for the Christmas season? What effect and influences has it made upon us and our culture?

For thousands of years prophets had been foretelling about the birth of the savior Jesus Christ. In the Bible the story is told about this special event. Why don't you find your Bible, dust it off, and read the book of Luke chapters 1 and 2.

Now back to my original thought. Upon deciding to learn more about Santa Claus, I found this story of St. Nicholas. By the way, St. Nicholas and Santa Claus are one and the same person and, the word "Santa" means "holy". Here is the story...

St. Nicholas was a fourth century saint who inspired our modern figure of Santa Claus. He was born near Myra, a port on the Mediterranean Sea.

Nicholas came from one of the city's wealthy merchant families, but he was not spoiled by his family's wealth. His mother and father taught him to be generous to others, especially those in need. So Nicholas came to see that helping others makes one richer in life than anything else.

One day, by chance, Nicholas heard about a rich man in Myra who lost all his money when his business failed. The man had three lovely daughters, all wishing to get married, but he had no money for their marriage. Besides, who would marry them, he thought, since their father is such a failure? With nothing to eat, the man in desperation decided to sell one of his daughters into slavery. At least then the rest of them might survive.

That night before the first daughter was to be sold, Nicholas, with a small bag of gold in his hand, softly approached their house and, tossing the gold through an open window, and quickly vanished into the darkness.

The next morning, the father found a bag of gold lying on the floor next to his bed. He had no idea where it came from. "Maybe it's counterfeit," he thought. But as he tested it, he knew it was real. He went over the list of his friends and business associates. None of them could possibly have given him this.

The poor man fell to his knees and great tears came to his eyes. He thanked God for this beautiful gift. His spirits rose higher than they had been for a long time because someone had been so unexpectedly good to him. He arranged for his first daughter's wedding and there was enough money left for the rest of them to live for almost a year. Often he wondered: who gave them the gold?

But by the end of the year, the family again had nothing, and the father, again desperate and seeing no other way open, decided that one of his daughters must be sold. But Nicholas, hearing about it, came by night to their window and tossed in another bag of gold as before. The next morning the father rejoiced, and, thanking God, begged His pardon for losing hope. Who, though, was the mysterious stranger giving them such a gift?

Each night afterwards the father watched by the window. As the year passed their money ran out. In the dead of one night he heard quiet steps approaching his house and suddenly a bag of gold fell onto the floor. The father quickly ran out to catch the one who threw it there. He caught up with Nicholas some distance away and recognized him, for the young man came from a well-known family in the city.

"Why did you give us the gold?" the father asked.

"Because you needed it," Nicholas answered.

"But why didn't you let us know who you were?" the man asked again.

"Because it's good to give and have only God know about it."

When the bishop of Myra died, the priests and leading people of the city, along with the neighboring bishops, came together in their cathedral to select a new bishop. They prayed and asked God to point out who it would be. In a dream, God said to one of them that they should all pray together the next morning. Someone would come through the cathedral door as they prayed. He should be their choice.

It was Nicholas who entered the cathedral the next morning. Immediately, the people of the city named him their bishop, for they knew that this unassuming person, whose good deeds they had learned about, was meant by God to lead them.

As bishop of Myra, Nicholas seemed more aware than ever of people's needs. He would appear all over the city offering help to anyone in difficulty, then quietly disappear without waiting for thanks. He shunned publicity.

Still, his reputation as a holy man grew and grew, even spreading to distant cities that had never seen him.

He was especially interested that families had enough to eat and a good place to live, that children got ahead in life, and that old people lived out their lives with dignity and respect. And he always loved the sailors living so dangerously on the sea. Without their ships, people everywhere would be without food and other goods they carried for trade.

Yet it is as a lover of children that Nicholas is best remembered today. While he lived, he gave the little ones he met small gifts-- some candy, a toy. His kindness, which always managed to surprise them, touched their hearts, and they learned from this holy man what a beautiful thing giving is.

It's in the figure of Santa Claus, whose name and activity Nicholas inspired that we have this saint still with us today.

Merry Christmas.

-The Rev. Duane Jones