

Christmas Messages

The ever ancient, the ever new

By the time Christmas comes, we may be tired of the "shop till you drop" advertising; we may think that we do not want to hear another Christmas carol; or we may be saddened that some businesses have replaced the word "Christmas" with "Holiday." Modern commercialism has pushed away to the background the spiritual significance of the Feast of the Birth of the Savior.

However, the event cannot be changed. The fact is that there was an event when there was a meeting between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. There never was such an event in the history of mankind, either before or since.

Caesar Augustus had earlier made a decree that affected the lives of many people, but two people in particular, Mary and Joseph. Rome, the great capitol of the political world, became linked with the little town of Bethlehem. There were shepherds living in the fields caring for their sheep. The glory of God shone in their night. The silence of the night was broken by the chorus of angels singing: "Glory to God on high, and peace to men of goodwill." And as if that were not enough, they were directed to Bethlehem, where they would find the Shepherd who would seek out the lost sheep. For Him there was no room at the inn.

When God stepped into human history, he was not first made known to the powerful and the mighty, but to the poor, the little people of the world. They were silent enough to listen, open enough to wonder. St. Luke indicates that the shepherds initially experienced fear. Fortunately, they overcame that and had the great joy and peace by being in the presence of the Savior. We are even told that later Mary pondered all these things in her heart.

Perhaps for each of us there may be an opportunity this Christmas to experience the presence of the Savior. Perhaps as we ponder these things in our hearts we will experience the inner peace that only he can give. Perhaps as we contemplate his birth we will be inspired to follow in his footsteps. Perhaps the power hidden in the child, but manifested in the adult, will touch our lives, and inspire us to greatness. May he bless our humble efforts and empower them to lead us forward with confidence and faith.

Father Gerry Condon
St. Patrick's Catholic Church
St. Williams Catholic church

Mothers of God

The medieval theologian Meister Eckhart wrote, "What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and if I am not full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.... We are all meant to be mothers of God."

Christmas is for Christians a commemoration of a unique event that happened about 2,000 years ago: A young girl named Mary conceived through the Holy Spirit and gave birth to God incarnate, who then walked among us teaching, healing and manifesting the will of God for all people. Jesus was killed because love threatens power, but Christ rose from the grave and invites us to an eternity of love and life that the world can never destroy.

There is no truer story in history, but I would challenge you to simultaneously think of Christmas—the birth of Christ—as a continuing possibility, even a necessity. When we offer our lives to God's purpose, we give birth not to God as a baby, but to the divine within ourselves. Christ has come, Christ will come again, Christ is always coming... if we let him.

One of my favorite Christmas carols is, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It includes this profound line: "O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in; Be born in us today." That's a prayer for the present and future, based on an old, old, timeless story.

As we celebrate the birth of a baby long ago, let us also examine ourselves to see how we, too, are giving birth to God's love and purpose in our time and culture. We are all meant to be mothers of God.

Rev. Lea Mathieu
Valby Lutheran Church

The Glorious Kingdom

I was recently sent a YouTube video of a children's Christmas pageant. From the look of things, it appeared to have been done in the late 70s or early 80s. All of the children processed forward in their Christmas costumes as angels, shepherds and wise men. And then they proceeded to sing a song that I think was called "He Came for the Glorious Kingdom." Well, one of the smallest angels began singing the song with so much gusto, it was actually distracting for the rest of the choir. She really got into it. She sang the entire song in a shout. One of my friends commented, "Can't say much for the voice, but wow! What a stage presence!"

If only we all had so much passion for the glory of God during the Christmas season. At this point, many of us are running around trying to get those last-minute things done... the final batches of cookies, the last presents, the perfect food for the occasion, the last bit of work done so we don't have to think about it anymore. But if we think about the season being about the glory of God and not the glory of our cooking or fabulous gift-giving ability, it gives us time to slow down and thank God for the gift of that little baby. What a precious and delicate gift that turns out to be indestructible.

This Christmas, let's remember that He did come for the Glorious Kingdom. May your Christmas be filled with the glory of God.

Pastor Stacey Shelton
Ione Community Church

Celebration of the unexpected

The traditions and carols and decorations of Christmas are so comforting familiar. If ever there was a holiday that we enjoy doing the same thing year after year—in fact, insist on it—it would be Christmas. Every year, in churches all around the world, the faithful and the not-so-faithful gather to hear the Christmas story from Luke 2 and sing Silent Night as candlelight spreads from pew to pew until the dark church glows. Every year, there's a tree and lights and presents and fudge and ham for dinner. Try telling a family who's always opened gifts on Christmas morning that the gift-opening will be happening on Christmas Eve this year, and be prepared to duck. Predictability is part of the celebration.

And so it's easy to forget what a disruption the story at the core of our Christmas celebration represents. A young girl, dealing with an unplanned pregnancy and a shortage of lodging, gives birth to the Son of the Most High God and lays him to rest in an animal feeding trough. The Creator of the universe stoops so far down as to become one of us... putting on skin and bones, accepting hunger and pain and exhaustion, becoming dependent on oxygen and a heart that will one day stop ticking. The quiet sleep of shepherds is interrupted by angels tearing open the heavens to announce the birth of a king, a message that should have more properly been reported at the palace. Who could have guessed that this child born into poverty would grow up to be such a nuisance to the religious establishment that they'd convince the hated Romans to nail him to a cross? Or that the dead man wouldn't stay put in his tomb?

God does not act as we think God should act. Instead, the lowly are lifted up, the mourners are comforted, the prisoners are freed, a poor and needy world gets to hear the good news: a Child has been born for you. God has sent his only Son to save us from the predictable consequences of sin. Death won't have the last word after all.

So maybe we should insert a little unpredictability into our Christmas celebrations this year. Maybe this is the year to engage in random, anonymous acts of kindness for people who don't deserve it. Maybe this is the year to call an estranged relative—the one you haven't spoken to in years—or include an annoying neighbor at your dinner table. This may be the year to give gifts that will make a difference, by donating money in the name of loved ones to international relief organizations that dig wells where there's no water, or provide mosquito nets in malaria-infested areas.

Do the unexpected. And expect God to keep doing the same, surprising you with gifts of hope, joy, and the peace that exceeds our expectations.

Pastor Katy Anderson
Hope Lutheran Church
All Saints Episcopal Church

All I Want For Christmas . . .

We live in one of the most prosperous nations in the world. Livability in the United States of America is a given principle which no one challenges. We can ask the question, "What do you want for Christmas?" The answer to that question in some sense fills the stores of America with so many wants that it sometimes boggles the mind. Sometimes the answer to that question can come from deep in the heart and does not have the shallow smack of a commercial Christmas. "That mom and dad could get along," "that grandma would get well," "that we would have enough to eat" or "that our son will make it home from the war," or maybe, "that God would give us one more Christmas together." At times the deep answers to a shallow question tug at our heart strings because we can remember when we have asked those very questions. Many times the way those questions have been answered in our lives determine how we feel, especially this time of year.

Two thousand years ago there was a nation that struggled under the rule of an occupational government from Rome that controlled most of the known world at that time. This nation was asking for a gift that had been promised to them many centuries before that time, of a savior who would come and establish his government and somehow everything would be all right if only he would come. But when they found out that the savior was just a baby who was born in a manger to a poor couple, Joseph and Mary, they wondered how, how would my question be answered? Certainly God had a different idea about what this salvation would look like than those who saw the baby born in the manger. God, of course, planted little clues for those to see who had eyes to see, but even his mother, with her storing up all of these memories of her son, could not see what God had in mind. One clue was that Joseph was to name him Jesus, "for he would save his people from their sins." Another clue was that he would be called Immanuel, which means "God with us." It wasn't until 33 years later that the true nature of God's story and plan to save the world began to be seen as the right answer to a very tough question that they had been asking for many years.

I am not sure all of our questions will be answered in this lifetime. Not all of the gifts we want for Christmas will be given. Sometimes our gift is dependent on the actions of someone else, or on time, circumstance or some other factor outside our control. But the thought I want to leave you with for this Christmas is that two thousand years ago a gift was given and, since that time, God has continued to give a gift to each of us. It does take faith to hope for a brighter future, but my hope is you can do that very thing because of the gift of Jesus Christ that was given to us through Mary in the form of a baby, truly the hope of the whole world and your hope this Christmas.

Wishing you all a merry Christmas and a happy new year,
Andrew Johnson
Heppner Christian Church

Presence

Matt 1:18, 23 - Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way... "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

Immanuel, God with us. It is a name and phrase that we use a lot in Christian circles, especially this time of the year. We sing songs, read verses and listen to stories that use this name Immanuel. I wonder if we really grasp the significance of "God with us."

Is it just me, or does the news of the world sound a little depressing: war, worldwide financial instability, unemployment, threats of nuclear power, poverty, health care, climate change, taxes and a never-ending election cycle. And this list is just about the larger international and national scene. There isn't enough time or space to talk about the personal struggles we all face right here in our little community.

These problems, though they seem so unique and overwhelming to us, are really not all that different from the ones facing the people of Israel, during the Roman occupation, more than 2,000 years ago. During this Roman occupation, many looked for the coming of the promised Messiah; one who would fix the mess, one who would be "God with us," Immanuel, one who would establish the kingdom of God. There was great hope.

Immanuel did come. His name was Jesus, which means "Yahweh saves," as he would save the people from their sins. His kingdom was a different kingdom. His followers were to be known for their repentance, for following God's commands with passion and compassion. They would love God and love their neighbor. This "kingdom" would be about releasing captives and healing. His followers would have freedom, joy, shalom and a peace that passes all understanding in spite of and in the midst of all of the social, political and personal turmoil. Their lives would be about the presence of God.

I have found that when my focus is on the presence of God, I have great hope, joy, freedom and a peace that passes all understanding. Even in spite of and in the midst of all of the problems, great and small, I will not be afraid. Problems seem to take a back seat when I try to love God and love people with passion and compassion. I have to tell you, there is great freedom in this...

Perhaps you find yourself during this holiday season a little down or stressed out. It might be because of the social and geopolitical circumstance. Maybe it is something intensely personal. Maybe it is because you are tired of battling the masses in the search for the perfect Christmas present. Might I make a suggestion... The greatest present is the presence of God in your life. Immanuel, "God with us."

Pastor Keith Price
Willow Creek Baptist

Celebrate Christmas

Certainly, Christmas is one of the most wonderful times of the year in Heppner. The street trees are lit. The light posts are decorated. The street sound system serenades us with Christmas music, both religious and secular. A week ago, we gathered as a community for table fellowship and a gift drawing, and a lighted parade. I am sure that there have been many in-home parties where friends have gathered for the sharing of finger-foods and desserts and conversation. Last week the youth of our community shared their musical talents under the direction of two of the blessings this community has been fortunate to receive... Mr. Joe Lindsey and Mrs. Michelle Stone. A couple of weeks ago, we gathered at Heppner United Methodist Church for the "Christmas Is" concert. Thanks to the Heppner Chamber of Commerce and its members, the month of December has been a party. And I am certain that there will be a lot of gift giving and receiving this weekend, among friends and family.

It's as if this Christmas season has been one big birthday party.

Oh, how easy it is to remember the real reason for Christmas. It isn't to have parties, and dinners, or to go into debt to buy expensive gifts for our loved ones.

Christmas began in the early Christian church to celebrate the coming of God into the physical world of humanity, through the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, who was both human and divine, both human and the Son of God our Creator. The teachings of Jesus were that God wants each of us to love one another as God loves us. The birth of Jesus was God's gift of love to humanity.

In the Gospel according to Luke, we are told that Jesus was born of humble birth. He was born homeless. He was born, not in a nice warm house, but rather in a drafty stable with a dirt floor. Notice of his birth was first revealed to shepherds who were tending flocks of sheep not their own. Incidentally, shepherds were not welcome in worship services for fear that they were not ritually clean. They were different from those who regularly attended church. And yet, God chose to reveal to the world through them the coming of the Messiah.

Let us, this year, join in celebrating Christmas as it was in the beginning. Let us celebrate Jesus' birthday by giving gifts and monetary support to the lowest and least in greater Heppner through the Neighborhood Center.

On behalf of Heppner United Methodist, I want to wish you a merry Christmas and encourage you to celebrate Jesus' birthday in the faith community of your choice. Heppner United Methodist Church will be celebrating its Christmas Eve service with 7 p.m. on Saturday and its Christmas Day service with lessons and carols at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday at the northeast corner of Gale and Church Streets.

Pastor Jonathan Enz
United Methodist Church

-See more messages and Christmas service schedules on PAGE EIGHT

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