

CHRISTMAS MESSAGES FROM AREA PASTORS

A Baby is Born

A baby is born. Angels sing. Shepherds come running. Most of us know that story well, and our fondness for telling it has enlarged it in ways probably never intended by its original authors. Luke is brief: there's Joseph, Mary, a child in a manger and some curious shepherds (who are the only ones to see angels that night). Matthew tells us elsewhere about a star and an unspecified number of wise men bearing gifts. But we've otherwise populated our nativity scenes with details the Bible doesn't mention, filling in the gaps with donkeys, camels, an innkeeper, gently falling snow and maybe even a little drummer boy.

But all that imaginative clutter might be crowding out the chief actor in this drama: God. The birth of Jesus (that is, Christmas) is God's story, not a child's tale. It's a story of unquenchable love for us all, each one of us made in God's image. It's a love that persists in spite of our tendency to tarnish that image with selfishness, pride, greed and more.

So, what's a Creator to do when a creation made perfect turns itself into a mess? God answered that question by stepping right into the middle of it. Instead of washing his hands of us and starting over somewhere else, God chose to save us from ourselves in a most peculiar way—by becoming one of us, slipping into human skin inside the womb of a young girl in an obscure corner of this complicated world so that God in Jesus could teach and heal and show us what God's love looks like. This is a love that stops at nothing to set things right again. No cost was too great—not the distress of a human birth in a place fit only for animals; not growing up to be the target of taunts and threats from the religious community; not being subjected to torture and death without cause; not lacking a place to lay his head until he was laid to rest in a stone-cold tomb (briefly). The world had never before encountered a love this costly and had done nothing to deserve the gift of God's own self.

But God gave it to us anyway, and as we begin to unwrap this gift by getting better acquainted with this reckless God, we'll find so many other gifts waiting inside: forgiveness, peace, hope, joy, love and the promise of life in God's presence forever.

That baby in the manger may be the smallest figure in the nativity scene but concealed inside is the largest gift we will ever receive: God with us. Emmanuel.

*Rev. Katy Anderson
Hopeful Saints Ministry
A Lutheran-Episcopal partnership*

Follow the Star

Last Sunday at St. Patrick Catholic Church, the children presented a musical program entitled "Follow the Star." There was a beautiful scene wherein a little girl dressed like a star moved around the audience and other participants, leading the Magi and the shepherds to the little town of Bethlehem, to the place of Mary and Joseph. This was a wonderful first-Christmas story enactment enjoyed by our parish community. And as I was reflecting on a theme for this year's Christmas message, I decided that the title should be "Follow the Star."

On Christmas, we remember the magnanimity of God, who shared His only son with humanity, a little babe bringing peace, joy and happiness to a suffering humanity. As I have explained before, just as the Father shared His own Son with us and dispelled our gloom, sin, shame and suffering, so, too, we are called to dispel the gloom, suffering and shame of others. For this we have a beautiful example in Mary, who prepared herself for the first Christmas by sharing her joy with her cousin Elizabeth. We, too, can thus prepare for Christmas, by sharing with those in need, as the miracle of Christmas is the miracle of sharing and reaching out.

God entered our human history as one of us when Jesus came into the world. He was born in poor conditions in a country exploited by the mighty Roman Domination. Mary, His mother, and Joseph, His foster father, suffered several hardships. The world we live in is perhaps in worsening conditions in spite of materialism and technological advancement: nuclear arms race, exploitation, corruption at all levels, evil habits, greed for power and wealth at the cost of peace and justice especially of the poor. It is to this world that the Babe of Bethlehem cries out as He did through the angels on the first Christmas night: "Peace to men of Good Will." Good will, therefore, is the first condition for peace and, hence, for the celebration of a Merry Christmas. Good will between husband and wife, between parents and children, between the rich and the poor, between teachers and students, between officers and their subordinates, etc. Only through goodwill can our actions, however simple and humble they may be, give glory to God.

As the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to men of good will," what comes to my mind during this Christmas is God reaching out to humanity, and the searching humanity finding the Babe in a little manger. The special STAR attracted the Magi to the manger, the shepherds, too, to the crib – the learned and the ignorant – everyone who looked out for Him. Through our little deeds of kindness and generosity let's also become STARS and spread the Christmas Joy and Peace to all around us.

*Fr. Thankachan Joseph
St. Patrick Catholic Church*

The Perfect Gift

2 Corinthians 9:15, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift."

On one of my visits to Africa, I was privileged to witness the distribution of "Operation Christmas Child" shoeboxes to children. People from around the world fill these shoe boxes with toys and other items which are then sent and given to children in needy places. On the occasion of my visit, there were about two hundred children, all sitting in a big school yard, trying their best to be patient as they waited for all to be given their box, appropriate to their gender and age. Most of these children had never received a gift of any kind before, so imagine their excitement when they opened their boxes and discovered their own precious gifts. It was one of the most joyous scenes I've ever beheld.

I've been giving a lot of thought to this matter of gift giving lately. I remember as a child how excited I was for Christmas in anticipation of opening my Christmas presents. Those days were long ago, and those gifts are but distant memories. Since then, I've received many gifts from family members and friends, some quite valuable and precious. But of all the gifts I've ever received, only one could be deemed "indescribable."

Some forty years ago I was given this gift. It came undeserved and unexpectedly. At the time, I knew I had need of it, but since then, I've come to understand, in a growing awareness of my own frailty, that I needed it much more than I then realized. Most gifts wear out over time, or they are replaced with something better or more suitable to our changing wants and needs, but this gift will never wear out. In fact, the more I examine it and make use of it, the more precious it becomes to me. The value and beauty of this gift is such that it only grows in its allure over time. The gift came to me at infinite cost to the giver, such is the largeness of his heart and readiness to give good gifts to all. Since I received this gift, I've met countless others who have received it too. And regardless of age, gender or stature, they are all likewise incredibly grateful for being so immeasurably blessed. One day, I'll meet the gift giver face to face. I've been told that I'll marvel even more as new facets of the gift will be unveiled to me (2 Thessalonians 1:10).

By now you've realized that I'm speaking of Jesus and salvation. He came into this world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15) and He's the indescribable gift spoken of 2 Corinthians 9:15. Salvation comes to us as a gift, freely given to those who put their trust in Him (Ephesians 2:8-9). He gladly forgives and saves and transforms us and assures us of a future home in heaven. He, in His person, is the perfect gift. Have you trusted in Him for salvation? There is much joy to be had in receiving Him (John 1:12).

*Jerry Conklin
Hospice Chaplain*

God is Near

I'm going to guess if you are like me, you could use some good news. Daily we are bombarded with disappointments that range from canceled events, sick friends and family members, or just not being able to get something we believe we need, like out of stock molasses (seriously, how can there be a shortage of such random stuff?). I really needed that molasses to pour over my fresh sourdough rolls, not that I'm still holding a grudge or anything.

Yes, the last two years have made it clear that this world is filled with unfulfilled desires, crushed dreams and just downright misery. From the trivial to the direst of circumstances we have seen collective disaster on a scale I have never experienced. To leave you there would be an unimaginable tragedy. However, hurt and brokenness are not the end of the story. There is more to this tale.

And the more, the oh, so much more, is the truth that God is near. God is near. He has come close to us. There is no better news than that. In fact, the truth that God has come near is what Christmas is all about.

Over and over again in the Bible, Jesus told his disciples and the crowds that gathered, "The kingdom of God is near," (Matthew 3:2 & 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 21:29). Jesus was saying, He was trying to tell those who heard His voice, that God is close. Open your eyes and see, God has come close to you. In fact, in the case of those who were listening to Jesus, God was standing right in front of them in a human body, in the person Jesus.

I want you to stop for a moment and think. Can you imagine something? I want you to entertain the idea that the God who created all things, who fashioned the stars in the sky, and carved the gorge with His finger, and made the sun to light the day...this same being has come near enough for you to see and hear His voice. Can you believe this could be true? It is true. And even more, it is also true that today, He is calling you by name saying, "I am near you."

This is wonderful news. This is news that smashes the chains of despair and gloom this world serves up to us every day. The news that God is near you has the power to change your life forever.

Maybe this holiday. Maybe this Christmas you would be willing to open the eyes of your heart to the truth that the nearness of God was manifest in a manger in a little town called Bethlehem. Maybe, just maybe you could even see that the nearness of God is manifest today in a little town called Heppner. God has come near to you. Would you come near to Him?

*Pastor Tripp Finch
Willow Creek Baptist Church*

Christmas Traditions

So, what are your Christmas traditions? Even if our tradition is to join Ebenezer Scrooge and mutter, "Bah! Humbug!," we still have them.

I have never had a chestnut roasted over an open fire. I tried wassail once and didn't much care for it. Eggnog is good, but one cup does me for a year. More up our alley is a tree with white lights, a creche on the mantel and cookies out for Santa...butter spritz cookies, to be exact. Santa has definite tastes.

Most of us spend a lot of time trying to live up to the expectations of our Christmas traditions. Lights go up on the house, usually (for whatever reason) on the first miserably wet and cold day right after Thanksgiving. The traditional Christmas meal schedule is organized who will host this year, who will bring what and will it be cheesecake or pecan pie for dessert. And a flurry of emails goes back and forth as Christmas gifts are bought; trying to figure out which grandkid has which Lego set.

It is a busy season. And it is a far cry from what the season is meant to be. Over the centuries we have turned it into an extravaganza of parties, gatherings, gifts, decorations, songs and glitter. But what it was meant to be was a simple recognition that we are not alone, that Emmanuel: God is with us. Simple message...simple birth.

Jesus was not born in a palace. And while the shepherds got the word from the angels, there wasn't a whole lot of singing in Bethlehem that night. Any celebrations going on were in the inns, while a pregnant woman about to give birth was relegated to a barn. Not much compassion given to the Prince of Peace and the future champion of compassion.

What this means for all of us is simply this: Enjoy the festivities, but never lose sight of why we have the festivities. It is good to enjoy the season and have a good time, but good times were not why Jesus came to the world. Jesus came to show us a better way, even if a sometimes sacrificial way, to live. Jesus came not so we could have fun, but so that we could have fulfillment. And that fulfillment of life would, in turn, bring a richer sense of joy to our entire life than simply a seasonal happiness.

Nothing wrong with the gatherings, the pecan pie, the Legos and the merriment. We should just never lose sight of what the season is all about. As trite as it sounds, we should always remember "the reason for the season." Everything else is, well, Christmas gravy.

Have a Blessed Christmas.

Rev. Jim Monroe and The Heppner United Methodist Church

Churches to hold Christmas services

The schedule for Christmas at Hopeful Saints Ministry (Lutheran and Episcopal) begins at 7 p.m. on December 24 to include worship with lessons, carols, candles and communion. On December 26 at 10 a.m. they will present Old and New Testament readings about the promise of a savior and sing more Christmas carols.

The Willow Creek Baptist Church will hold a

candlelight Christmas Eve service at 5:30 p.m. at the church at 560 Minor Street in Heppner. This will be a brief candlelight service filled with joy, Scripture readings and even live music. They will also be having regularly scheduled services on Sunday, December 26 beginning at 10 a.m. All are welcome. All of their services are available live online at <https://www.facebook.com/wcbcheppner>.

Justice Court Report

Morrow County Justice of the Peace, Glen Diehl, has released the following Justice Court report:

-Kaleb G. Tate, 30, Ione, was convicted of failure to drive within lane, fine \$265; and failure to report an accident to law enforcement, fine \$440.

-Brandon T. Peck, 25, Ione, was convicted of violation of basic rule, fine \$165.

-Aaron A. Lester, 25, Heppner, was convicted of expired license plates, fine \$115.

-McKenzie Kennedy, 31, Heppner, was convicted of violation of basic rule, fine \$165.

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