

December 24, 2022: THIS DAY'S SERMON – Christmas Eve

Readings: Luke 2:1-20; Psalm 96:10-13

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Let us pray: *Giver of Light and Love, we sit in this moment, humbled by the starkness of a stable, astounded by the hope that fills it. We sit in stillness, laying down the busyness of our search for Christmas perfection, that we might take in your perfect gift, given into the absolute imperfection of the world ... a Savior is born. Hallelujah. Amen.*

Welcome to Christmas! It feels good to pause this evening ... to take in this moment in time which comes to us again. It feels right to still ourselves, to lay to rest our annual search for meaning and perfection found in the perfect tree and decorations, the perfect gift, the perfect worship service ... the perfect way to celebrate with those we love.

Ironically, in the midst of our search for perfection, we are brought to our knees with none other than absolute imperfection. The absolute imperfection of the way in which God has chosen to make God's self known to the world. In a child, born of displaced parents, and bonded in the shame of this pregnancy. In a family subjected to the whim of a ruler who wants to take stock of his subjects and possessions, the objects of his rule – the sources of his revenue.

In order to understand the radical nature of the Christ child – Immanuel, God With Us – coming into the world in this fashion, we need to understand the lives of the ordinary people living in the time of Jesus' birth

The people lived under the imperial rule of the Roman Empire. Some 80 to 90 per cent of the population got their living from agriculture. There was no middle class. The majority of the people were peasants living in villages that surrounded a city – a city that was largely parasitic to its surrounding villages.

Generally speaking, peasants had little control over their political and economic situation. Most land was controlled by a small number of wealthy, elite families. The landowners rented the land for tenant farmers, who, together with their families and possibly slaves, actually worked the land.

It was this peasant class, constituting the substantial majority of the population, which had the biggest burden of supporting the state and the privileged classes. The privileged elite, which were few in number, drew its wealth from the products of peasants and herders, craftsmen and traders.

These products funded a lavish lifestyle for the ruling class, including palaces, temples, fortifications, monuments and a forceful army. Members of the imperial ruling class enjoyed a comfortable and privileged standard of living without engaging in any productive labor on behalf of society and with no obligation to those they ruled, other than to assure

that they were able to produce sufficient wealth to sustain the rulers in their privilege.

Taxation was double: Rome demanded taxes from its provinces in order to sustain the government and the army and to build roads essential to the empire. The local vassal kings took their share in order to sustain their own privileged life and to build palaces, new cities, and monuments dedicated to Caesar.

These taxes were extracted at the time of the harvest. In times of poor harvest, this meant that the farmer, as well as the peasant class, would be the ones left to suffer or even starve.

It is into this social and economic context that the Christ child enters. At Caesar's command, Joseph and Mary travel from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem.

It is in that humble city that Jesus enters the world. Received into the arms of his mother, Mary, he is wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a feed box. There was no place for them in the many rooms set aside for travelers.

At this point, we can pause to wonder why no one moved aside to provide a space for this pregnant young woman to give birth. Without such a place, the couple settles themselves amongst the livestock, where they deliver their child. We can likely all imagine that Mary and Joseph would have prayed for the bread necessary to nourish this newborn son as they laid him in the manger.

A manger. A feed box for the creatures who come in search of nourishment. How ironic that the one we Christians have come to receive as the "Bread of Life" would be delivered into the world in such a way ... in the city whose very name means "House of Bread". How amazing that this child would grow to be the bread that would sustain the world.

Mary and Joseph would, no doubt, have anxiously wondered how they would provide bread to this newborn son ... only to experience the reality that he would grow to be the bread that would feed them and the entire world.

Bread holds great importance both within and outside of our Holy Scriptures. It is mentioned at least 492 times in the Bible, beginning in Genesis and continuing through Revelation.

From the manna provided to the Israelites on their wilderness journey, to the five loaves broken and multiplied to feed the masses, bread remains so significant and important that we continue to use it in both Jewish and Christian celebrations

today.

And, yet, even in all its glory and importance, the ingredients for making bread are the ordinary stuff of earth and air and sea; wholly dependent on one another. From the yeast composed of thousands of living plant-like micro-organisms, to the water and the wheat, all these things, when combined, provide nourishment that carries the possibility of filling and sustaining humanity.

Pr. Phil and I have a plaque hanging in our kitchen which reads, in part: "There is such beauty in bread. Beauty of sun and soil. Beauty of patient toil."

Tonight we gather to celebrate this beautiful Bread of Life given to us in the form of Jesus, the Christ Child, Immanuel, God-With-Us. In the joy of this time, we remember that the ordinary became the extraordinary.

And, yet, this extraordinary gift was not laid in the pantries or on the tables of the elite. It was, instead, given into the lives of the meek and the lowly; the unknowns and the despised by society; the farmers and the peasants who were the foundation of that very society. It was given not through their asking, but through the generosity and love of our Creator.

The receiving of this gift was not then – and is not now – dependent upon one's social or economic status. It comes to us whether we are looking or not. It comes to us in both the expected and the unexpected places of life. It is God's gift to the world ... a gift given so that all might be fed.

This is Jesus' purpose. This is Jesus' life. A life given so that we may have life and give life. A life which nourishes us so that we might nourish the world around us, in the breaking and sharing of bread and our expressions of joy to the world.

Amen

This Day's Children's Sermon

Everywhere you turn, lights shine in the darkness, proclaiming that God's eternal presence is with us. Homes, trees, and buildings are draped with colorful Christmas lights. When we started our worship tonight, Eric and Everett Pearl lit the blue, pink and white advent and Christ candles for us. During this past week – and tonight, our Jewish friends are lighting candles of their own in what are called Hanukaiah or Hanukkah menorahs.

Hanukkah has its own meaning, but it connects with our Christmas story. Without Hanukkah, there would be no Christmas. While Hanukkah is a distinctly Jewish holiday, and Christmas is a distinctly Christian holiday, the two are actually more connected than you might think. In fact, in some ways, Hanukkah is actually the original Advent.

Jesus owed his life to Hanukkah and, in fact, we owe our own Christian faith to it. As we come to this night of the birth of Jesus, and to Christmas Day tomorrow, we are going to give each of you a candle of your own to remember that God wants us to stand up for each other and help each other in love so that God's light can shine on all people.

Will you help me pray?

Dear God, we thank you for the Light that you give to the world. Help us to shine your light on everyone around us so that your love can make the world a brighter place. We thank you for the gift of your light – Jesus – given to us tonight. Amen.