

Christmas Eve Message – Candlelight Service
Luke 2:1-20
December 24, 2017

“Today, in the Town of.....”

Today a child was born. Maybe this miracle happened in a comfortable birthing room here in Milwaukee...maybe in a run-down trailer home in the Appalachian Mountains - or maybe in a grass hut with a mud floor...it still happens that way in some places. Today someone died. Maybe they were old and full of faith and longed to close their eyes and release their achy body to the Lord. But possibly they were someone who had no idea at all what trails death, no promise of eternal life, but they died nonetheless. Today someone will kneel and propose love with a ring they got from Jarrod or they'll be having a “holly jolly” Christmas like Burl Ives hopes we all have. But today, in some home decked out for Christmas a man and a woman will look at each other and wonder why and how it happened, but what has happened is their love for each other is over.

Today in Wauwatosa or Brown Deer kids will tear wrapping off gifts, shake them, and giggle delightedly over the prospect that it really is what they think it is. But today in places like Port of Prince, Haiti or Aleppo, Syria, kids will lie down their sweet heads kids who've only heard of this tradition and they wonder what it would feel like to be so blessed, even if they know about the God whose birth inspired all the giving.

Today, many, including many of you, will have hearts warmed by the songs of Christmas, maybe one of you here tonight may come to faith for the first time hearing the gospel of Christ's birth and of the God who did not hesitate to enter this world so that you could spend eternity in his heaven. But today the same message will mean little to those whose cold doubt about the words “*God with us*” is real, for whom a hardship or the prideful side of human reason or the inattentiveness of the church genuinely question this message of “*God with us*”, especially when so much wrong permeates the world God supposedly has graced with that presence.

Today is the first Christmas you've spent without your wife or dad, and the sight of the tree or the ornament they bought or the empty place at dinner is fresh reminder of what never can be again. Or today is the first Christmas with your first child, and you are so full of gratitude to God holding that precious life in your arms tonight in this sanctuary. You're learning that parental love is pretty cool, even if at this hour it's also a bit exhausting.

Today you've had a well deserved rest from your labors, and are grateful for a day off tomorrow too. Today there are folks waiting tables in restaurants or serving up a glass after glass of Christmas cheer in bars so that someone who just needed someplace - anyplace to go to be with another human being will have one. Today in this city someone's injury or illness landed them in the hospital, disappointed to say the least but at least the hospital or the ambulance they needed was available because of those folks who do work Christmases.

Today the Christmas celebration in Sutherland Springs Texas is somber, tainted by the mayhem that community witnessed not two months ago. Today in countries we find hard to pronounce they wonder if the mayhem of civil war will ever end, and whether they've ever heard of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow or not, they sure would resonate with his lament "*in despair I bowed my head...there is no peace on earth I said, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.*" But today in this city, perhaps, someone will set aside differences they realize are not so grave, if they can even remember what started them in the first place and so embark upon and enjoy again the complicated but oh so real gift that is forgiveness.

Today is Christmas Eve –a remembrance and celebration of the night when literally heaven came to earth and the Creator of the whole magnificent universe inhabited his creation in the most astonishing and humble way. Tonight's worship is therefore a unique privilege wherein we are invited not just to ponder a miraculous birth but to commit ourselves to the one whose birth the angels sang, the one whose life has impacted the world like no other life ever has and whose life ought each and every day to invade and shape ours. Today is also the eve of "*bowl week*" – 6 days till the Badgers take on the Hurricanes. Got your tickets to Miami?

Today is a day like any other day...and it is a day like none other. Few days can feel quite this good, commemorate an event that offers so much real, tangible joy and yet for some still hurt so much. But the prophesy of Isaiah allows us to imagine a time when hurt will be no more. The story of Christ's birth to ordinary people – not the extraordinary ones we've come to make of them, enables us to believe it can happen again.

If we can desire something like peace on earth and goodwill among us all, we can also come to believe that it is possible. And together here we are, all of us, unique and curious and mysterious and wonderful combinations of young and old and somewhere in between, all of us quite common and yet holy, bearers of the image of God, beset by our personal sin and saved by God's very personal grace, temporary citizens, no occupants really of a not quite world but by simple faith in the remarkably simple story Luke told about a Savior- Christ the Lord – eternal citizens of heaven.

Today is really something isn't it? AMEN