

Would You Like To Hold the Baby?

Luke 2:1-20

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016]

I

Have you ever wondered what life would be like if there were no Christmas?

Imagine a world of darkness, cold, and death—

a world where the message of “peace on earth, goodwill to all” is never proclaimed...

a world where the Angelic announcement of a Savior born in the city of David is never heard.

A world without Christmas would be a dreary, depressing, and desolate place.

C.S. Lewis imagined just such a world in his fantasy children’s series, “The Chronicles of Narnia.”

In “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,”

the White Witch has all of Narnia under her spell,
it is always winter,
and Christmas never comes.

But when the four Pevensie children—

Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—
stumble through the magic wardrobe into Narnia,
the thaw begins.

Father Christmas arrives bringing gifts for the children.

The days of the White Witch’s reign are numbered.

Christmas comes and the great lion Aslan,
the Son of the Emperor Over the Sea,
brings a new birth of justice, freedom, and peace
to all the creatures of Narnia.

II

Dr. Rodney Kennedy says that creation was the first Christmas.

Picture, he says, the entire universe bathed in darkness and cold when the breath of God moved over the void stirring up new life.

God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

Billions of lights from billions of galaxies.

Gifts of beauty beyond counting.

And then God poured abundant gifts out on a fragile but astonishingly beautiful planet called Earth.

Make no mistake, Creation was the first Christmas.

John, who’s Gospel has no birth story, narrates Christmas for philosophers and theologians.

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:3-5)

And so it has gone—
year after year,
decade after decade,
century after century—

Christians like us gathering by candlelight on December 24 to welcome the new creation that is Christmas.

To welcome that new creation and somehow to find a way to live the spirit of Christmas throughout the year.

James Autry in his poem “Christmas,” says that every Christmas in their little country church in Mississippi,

*...the preacher said,
Wouldn't it be nice if we
could keep the Christmas spirit
all year long.*

*And we thought,
“It would be nice,”
and told ourselves,
we'd try.*

And so it goes, year after year—
all of us trying,
sometimes failing,
and at times getting it right.

And so I ask you tonight:

Are you ready to keep Christmas?

Are you ready for Christmas to come again?

III

In our Gospel lesson, Luke announces the coming of Christmas to a small town named Bethlehem.

A trio of faithful women is associated with Bethlehem.

Jacob's wife **Rachel** died while giving birth to Benjamin on the road to Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19).

Bethlehem is also the place of new beginnings for **Ruth**,
 a foreigner from Moab,
 who came to town with her mother-in-law Naomi.

Perhaps you remember Ruth's beautiful affirmation of faith:

*Where you go, I will go;
 Where you lodge, I will lodge;
 Your people shall be my people,
 and your God my God.
 Where you die, I will die—
 there will I be buried.*

Ruth ends up marrying Boaz, the great-grandfather of King David.

Luke tells us that Jesus is descended from the house and lineage of David.

And then, of course, there is **Mary**,
 the one chosen by God to bear the Child of love.

Mary and Joseph are summoned to Bethlehem by an emperor who needs more tax revenue.

Somehow it always seems to be about politics,
 but if we think it's **only** about politics
 then perhaps we aren't trusting God enough.

The empire deals in taxes and death,
 but God delivers gifts of life and salvation.

Mary gives birth to her first-born son,

and Rachel and Ruth rejoice.

There was an ancient prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children, because they were not (Jeremiah 31:15),
but Rachel weeps no more.

Mary has delivered the Christmas gift that the world has longed for and waited for,
but didn't know it needed.

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government shall be upon his shoulder.*

Upon us has a light shined.

Our joy is increased,
not just by gifts under a tree,
but by the gift of God for the people of God.

Jesus is the Christmas gift that comes to us wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying
in a wood-carved manger.

We cannot explain how the glory and power of God are poured into an infant
weighing perhaps seven pounds.

The One who laid the foundation of the earth now lies in a manger.

The One who determined the measurements of the ever expanding universe now
comes as a tiny baby.

The Maker of galaxies is now cradled in the arms of a young girl.

If not for some shepherds watching their flocks by night,
this whole event might have passed under the radar of a world too
preoccupied to notice what God was up to.

Shepherds were at the bottom rung of the social ladder,
 yet they are the ones who receive heaven's RSVP invitation,
 as God's messenger says to them:

*"Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; for **to you** is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."*

Before the shepherds can catch their breath...

"There was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.'"

The glory of heaven now comes to the darkness of earth,
 and the shepherds represent all of us as they scurry off to Bethlehem
"to see this thing that has come to pass."

IV

We know how Mary felt about all this—

Luke tells us she *"treasured all these words, and pondered them in her heart."*

We also know how the shepherds felt, as they return to their flocks *"glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."*

I can't help but wonder how the angels felt about their role in this divine drama.

An ancient Christmas legend tells of how God called the angels of heaven together one day for a special choir rehearsal.

God told them that there was a special song that she wanted them to learn...
 an anthem that they would sing at a very important occasion.

The angels went to work on it,

rehearsing long and hard...
with great focus and intensity.

In fact, some of the angels grumbled a bit...
for God insisted on a very high standard for the choir.

As time passed, the choir improved in rhythm, tone, and quality.

Finally God announced that they were ready...
but then God surprised the angels,
telling them that they would only sing the song once...
and only on one particular night.

There would be just one performance of this great song they had worked on
so long and hard.

Again, some of the angels grumbled.

The song was so extraordinarily beautiful and they sang it so well...
surely, they could sing it many, many times.

God only smiled and told them that when the time came, they would understand.

Finally, one night, God called them together.

They gathered above a field just outside of Bethlehem.

"It's time," God said to them... and the angels sang their song.
O my, did they sing it!

*"Glory to God in the highest... and on earth peace and good will toward all
people!"*

And as the angels sang, they knew there would never be another night like this one,

and there would never be another birth like this birth in Bethlehem.

When the angels returned to heaven, God reminded them that they would not formally sing that song again as an angelic choir,
but if they wanted to, they could hum to themselves on occasion.

One angel was bold enough to step forward and ask God why...
why could they not sing that majestic anthem again?

"Because," God explained, **"my Son has been born, and now earth must do the singing!"**

V

I invite you now, take one last look at the manger.

Behold Mary gently lifting Jesus from the manger,
holding him in her arms,
and with a trusting smile
she asks you the only question that matters:

“Would you like to hold the baby?”

Reach out your arms.

Open your heart and mind and spirit to hold him forever.

Christmas comes once again!

Amen.