

December 24, 2020
The Nativity of Our Lord—Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-20
Isaiah 9:2-7
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Good News of Christmas

When I was growing up, it was a tradition that my parents always left our outdoor Christmas lights and the electric candles in our windows on all night on Christmas Eve. For some reason, that was a very big deal to me. Such a big deal that I remember it now, decades later. Most nights in December they would turn the lights off as they were going to bed, but on Christmas Eve, they would stay on all night, adding the brightness and joy of that night. The light shines in the darkness.

When my sister and I were little, and even into our teens, we had a friendly competition going on when we unwrapped our home nativity scene and put it up. In an unspoken way we had ranked the characters in the nativity scene in order of importance, and we both wanted to be the one who unwrapped the shapeless bundles of old newspaper to discover one of the big characters. It was exciting to get the angel, Joseph ranked pretty high, Mary was a very big deal, and of course, whoever unwrapped baby Jesus took the prize. There wasn't actually any prize, it was just the glory of having picked one of the holy family or the angel out of the box and the thrill of seeing them looking up at you once you'd stripped away all of the paper. After the friendly competition, we would work together to set up the nativity scene. We had very specific ways of setting up the nativity scene, knowing exactly who went where, including a shepherd, who always stood on a

platform of the roof of our little stable and a lamb who, was improbably climbing the stairs. That took many minutes of careful balancing, to make sure that the lamb would stay. Why we did all of this or when it all started, I couldn't tell you, but it was important to us. It was a tradition.

My parents had a Christmas morning rule. They gave us a time before which we were not allowed to wake them up on Christmas morning. We weren't allowed to wake them up and we certainly weren't allowed to go downstairs to see the gifts that filled the living room. They knew that they couldn't control when we woke up, just when we got up. Usually, the allowable wake up time was 7:00 a.m., but of course, two little girls excited about Christmas woke up much earlier than that. So, it became our tradition that whatever time one of us woke up, we would sneak into the other's room and into the other's bed and we would lie there together, talking, laughing, speculating, wondering, keeping each other company, and watching the clock, counting down the minutes until we were finally allowed to get out of bed to go and get our parents up. When I was 24 years old, my last Christmas before I got married, my sister was 18, soon to turn 19. We were both young adults, but my parents had still given us a wake-up time, in a kind of tongue in cheek way, knowing that both of us could easily sleep through the assigned wake up time. I think that the assigned time was 8:00 a.m. and at about 7:30 my sister crept into my room and got into the single bed that I still slept in when I was home. For a half hour we talked and we laughed and we wondered and we watched the clock, waiting for the minutes to change to zeros, so that we could go wake our parents up, with a "Merry Christmas!" It didn't matter that we were both old enough to vote or that I was engaged to be married. It was our tradition.

I have always loved my Christmas traditions. I still do. And I know that you do too. People that you always see, things that you always do during the Christmas season. For many of you, worship here at Emmanuel is a Christmas tradition, whether it is the Christmas Eve candlelight service or coming here in your pajamas for Christmas Day worship. This year, “come as you are” worship doesn’t feel like quite the novelty it usually does, when we’ve spent 10 months, “coming as we are” to online worship.

This year, many of us are grieving the loss of many dearly loved Christmas traditions. This year, it is much harder to have the kind of Christmas that we look forward to every year. In fact, it might feel like Christmas has been stolen by this year of disease, by this year of loss, by this year of grief.

Some of us will spend this Christmas completely alone, perhaps with only a phone call or a Zoom meeting to connect us to family and friends, perhaps not even with those things. Some of us will not get to see people this Christmas season that we have spent every Christmas of our lives with, extended family and friends. Some of us are used to our homes overflowing with guests on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day and this year, that just can’t happen. Some of us are used to this being a travel time, when we get in our cars or get on an airplane, to travel to see our loved ones. But not this year. This year we’re staying home,

Some of us know that one of the beloved ones who we miss this Christmas will never again take their place at our Christmas dinner tables or around our Christmas trees, will never again open gifts we pick out for them, will never again sing their favorite carol with us. Our faith tells us that those beloved dead are celebrating Christmas in another way this year, around the

throne of the Lamb, but still, they leave a hole in our celebrations, that can never be filled.

This year, Christmas has contracted, become small enough to fit into our homes, and our traditions have had to change, maybe just this for this year and maybe forever.

But, also, this year, in spite of all that we will miss about our Christmas traditions and Christmas gatherings, we might find that we have some extra time this year, that would, in other years, be taken up by the doorbell ringing, by company arriving, by meals to prepare, by sheets to put on beds for guests, by traveling, by so many of the things that we have made Christmas about, that maybe, we can hear, maybe we can see, maybe in a year, when we really need it, we can feel what Christmas is really about.

The traditions that we love, as wonderful, joyful, and wholesome as they might be are not the good news of Christmas, even though it's still okay to look forward with hope to a time when we might be able to resume them. The light that shines in the darkness is not the lights that we hang on our Christmas trees or in our yards, it is not even the candles that gleam in our windows. All of those lights are either just playful ways to say that we're celebrating or symbols of the light that we truly need, the light that truly comes at Christmas and always, into our lives, into our hearts, into our homes. They are symbols of the light that comes to a people living in a land of deep darkness, a people struggling, a people suffering, a people worried, a people living in a time of upheaval, a people wondering how we are going to make it through this winter. But the true light, who has come and is coming into the world is Jesus. Unto us the light comes, for us the light shines, for us Jesus is born. Emmanuel, God with us.

Every year, 18 years of preaching on Christmas Eve, I have always preached on the gospel reading that we know and love, the most familiar story of Christmas, from Luke's gospel, the place where we hear about Bethlehem and the stable, and the manger, and the swaddling clothes, and the angels, and the shepherds, and good news of great joy for all people. A story that we celebrate in pageants and in our nativity scenes at home and here at church, and in children's books, and in our imaginations of Christmas.

This year, I have been drawn to the reading from Isaiah, written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, but still seen by the church as a prophecy that spoke to the people of its time, but that still has meaning for us today, as we celebrate Jesus' birth. There was some long-ago child of Isaiah's time who brought hope to the people of his time.

But Isaiah's words also point us to the good news of the birth of another child, a child whose birth brings hope to people of all time, a child whose birthday we are still celebrating 2000 years later, because through the decades, and centuries, and millennia since his birth, his life, his story, his teachings, his presence, have brought strength, peace, courage, and hope to millions of people down through the generations.

And now it is our story to share, maybe it's the one thing that will stay the same for us this Christmas. But it is the most important thing. That this child, was born for us, comes to us in our sufferings and in our sorrow, and brings us what our hearts truly yearn for, good news, that we are not alone, that we are not forgotten, that we are watched over, that God is zealous for us, that we are the beloved of God. These words spoken first to a long ago to a community in distress have become words for us to cling to in our own time of fear, of anguish, of loss.

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The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us, and he is named Wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, Prince of Peace.

This is the good news of Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen.