

**Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Sunday, December 27, 2009
Rev. Charles L. Taylor**

The Birth of a Baby; the Death of a Man

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Luke 1: 26-35, 39-56; 2: 1-20

John 1: 1-18

Christmas joy, celebration, parties, great food, even religious services –

and now it's back to the real world.

Some of us perhaps never left it, overwhelmed by the anxiety and hassle of modern life,
but the rest of us have had an emotional pump-up,
of excitement and lights, trees and shopping, gifts and family.

It's our annual mixture of pleasure and stress, delight and exhaustion, joy and tension –
followed shortly after by all the old worries, complexities and uncertainties.

We have heard about peace and goodwill;
we have marked the birth of the Christ child;
we have made merry in festivities.

And now we go back to the weary old world, convinced at heart that it isn't going to change.

The world will go on as it has.

The wars will continue;

hunger will remain;

corruption will be with us;

selfishness will persist.

We are realists. We know how the world works.

Then we hear the clarion declaration of John:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Or as the New English Bible translates it,

“the Word already was ... what God was, the Word was.”

This Word, this Christ, came to his own, but not everyone accepted him.

John's faith is firm, but it is one proclaimed in a broken world.

The opposition between those who accept and those who reject the Word
takes place on a decidedly imperfect planet.

The redeeming power of the Word is not universally obvious.

Some just don't get it.

Yet to those who do receive him are given the power to become children of God.

They are the ones who suffer and still believe,

the ones who endure life's injustices and keep on being faithful,

the ones who perceive deeply the world's woes

and in spite of everything continue to have hope.

They are the ones who work for justice, even in the dark times,

the ones who pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,”

the ones who labor to make that happen

even if it isn't the way the world works.

The Word became flesh and lived among us.

The eternal met everyday life, life in the raw, life as it was lived.

In the rude circumstances of human history:

A decree from Caesar Augustus went out that all the world should be taxed.

Joseph went up from Galilee into Judaea to Bethlehem.

And so did Mary, his espoused wife, being very pregnant.

There was no room for them in the inn.

There were shepherds minding their own business out there in the fields.

But in the midst of this the cosmic intervenes:

The angel of the Lord came upon them.

The glory of the Lord shone round about them.

Suddenly there was a whole host of angels.

And surely the most cosmic of all was their message:

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior
who is Christ the Lord.”

Then back down to earth:

“And this will be a sign unto you; you shall find the baby
wrapped in common clothes and lying in a manger.”

This Emmanuel, this God with us, was not going to be easy.

T. S. Eliot expresses this beautifully in his poem “Journey of the Magi.”

“A cold coming we had of it,” it begins.

“Just the worse time of the year

For a journey ...”

and then after recounting this difficult trek, Eliot continues:

“All this was a long time ago, I remember,

And I would do it again, but set down

This set down

This: were we led all that way for

Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,

But had thought they were different; this Birth was

Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

I should be glad of another death.”

This birth and death, this nativity and crucifixion, Reinhold Niebuhr says, reveals the character of God particularly with regard to the relationship between judgment and mercy,

i.e., between God’s wrath and God’s forgiveness.

God’s mercy is not a forgiveness that ignores the distinction between good and evil.

That would make judgment meaningless.

Yet in the cross of Christ, there is “assurance that judgment is not the final word of God.”

The good news of the Gospel is that God takes our sinfulness unto Himself;

“and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life.”

Without this divine intervention and divine sacrifice

no reconciliation and no easing of our uneasy consciences would be possible.¹

No true and lasting joy could be ours.

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, **The Nature and Destiny of Man**, pp. 142-143.

Incarnation, in other words, gives rise to redemption,
redemption not only for individuals but for the whole creation.
The birth of Jesus leads directly to the cross,
not for our personal salvation alone but for the emancipation of the entire universe.
Therein lies our Christian hope.

In the last two weeks, I have experienced once again the German Advent season
with its special music, liturgy, sermons and communion in the churches
but also with its Christmas markets, its lights and decorations everywhere, the crowds, the parties.
Like us, the Germans confuse religion and partying.
Like us, they strive to overcome depression that so easily accompanies grey skies
in the few hours it is not dark.
But Christmas is not the tensile, the garish music, the commercial displays or
even the tasteful home decorations, the oratories, and the carefully constructed liturgies.

The joy of Christmas of which I speak is no ephemeral “Christmas spirit”
to be lost even sooner than the new year’s resolutions.
It is not transient pleasure and entertainment.
It is a profound peace that takes hold in the very depths of our hearts,
founded upon our trust in God for our own redemption and for the world’s redemption
through the Christ child, the Lord of all.

Let us pray.

The shepherds’ terror turns to joy. Peace comes to those whom God favors. Even so, come Lord Jesus.