

“A Merry Christmas & a Happy Birthday for You”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Christmas Eve – 24 December 2018
Luke 2:1-10

On Christmas Eve, it often seems that anything worth saying has probably already been said. Billions of people in millions of churches across the world have, for a very long time, gathered year after year to share and enjoy the story of Jesus’ birth.

Some tend to focus on the shepherds, on how strange it was that the angels chose them to bear the news of such great hope and peace. You see, shepherds weren’t prominent. In fact, they were pretty far down the rungs on the social ladder, and most people thought they were a little shady. They didn’t settle down like most respectable people did. So why, why would an angel visit them, instead of somebody else, or for that matter, anybody else?

Maybe there’s some symbolic significance, like how shepherds were known to be fairly simple and humble and, therefore, perhaps more likely to listen and seek Jesus out. Or perhaps this simply a practical decision on the angel’s part. The census had everyone very busy moving from place to place, a lot like us this time of year, but for shepherds moving around was normal. It’s what they did. So approaching them, a probably less distracted and more receptive audience, makes sense.

Of course, shepherds aren’t for everybody. It’s not that anybody’s anti-shepherd, but they’re pro-something else. Plenty of people prefer to focus on Mary and Joseph and their struggles, and that’s a good part of the story. Riding on a donkey for any distance over rough ancient roads had to be very uncomfortable, but at nine months’ pregnant? I can’t imagine, and I don’t want to. And once they got to Bethlehem, the neon sign at every inn was flashing No Vacancy.

They finally found some space in a cave or a barn. We don't really know which, only that it was better than giving birth in the street. And for some people that place, with the hay and the cows and the goats and whatever else was in there, means more than the shepherds or the travel troubles of Mary and Joseph. What's humbler than taking your first nap in a feeding trough? What better way to contrast the greatness of Jesus with how he humbly came into the world? But for some people, the whole crèche thing has gotten so familiar, it's bred contempt.

So, we look to those exotic magi from the East, following the mysterious star. The problem is, they're not in Luke's Gospel. Matthew has the copyright on them, and in the Church's tradition they don't show up for another twelve days at Epiphany. So if you're really into all the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh, come back week after next, and we will set you up.

Of course, for some people, sadly, none of this means anything. It's just a fairy tale for children who never quite grew up, a story for the sentimental and weak, an excuse for someone like me to dress up in fancy robes and satisfy the gullible. That skeptical sometimes cynical perspective is very popular right now. In fact, each of us, from time to time, views the world through that lens. And I can see why. Every year the Church gets gussied up in bright colors, and we trundle out all of our most cherished carols. And we sing. We sing "O Come All Ye Faithful," so that we can listen to "Angels We Have Heard on High," that bring "Joy to the World," and finally a "Silent Night." But after all that singing then what?

It's quite the show, there's no denying that. Some places even bring real camels and a donkey right up front. But for an increasing number of people, what we're doing right now isn't much different from fireworks on the 4th of July. It's tons of fun and amazing while it lasts if

you go in for that sort of thing, but America doesn't get measurably better, and neither does the Church at Christmas, from all the fireworks. So what's the point?

Well, just about everyone, including most of the skeptics and some of the cynics I know, celebrate birthdays. As we grow older, they tend to become more low-key affairs, but for children, we try to make them special, even for one-year-olds, who have no clue what's happening, except you can make a big mess with your cake and mommy actually likes it!

A birthday celebrates someone because we are grateful they are alive. We often give that person gifts as a sort of a response to the gifts they give us: their presence, their love, even their little quirks that are annoying sometimes. It's not all about them. It's not all about us. It's about a relationship that brings joy and meaning.

Only the most heartless Grinch of a cynic would dismiss birthdays by saying, "If you really love someone, you don't need to throw a big party every year on the random day they exited the womb." We all know somebody like that, don't we? But there's just a smidgen of truth in that. The joy we feel for someone's life needs to be expressed somehow every day, or the annual birthday party is a bit of a fraud, and that's where we as Church can do better.

Christians celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas. We rejoice over how God came into the world so that love might be more fully known. We give thanks over how God's power, revealed in great humility through Jesus, can bring people together by healing broken relationships, both between God and us and between us and others. We rejoice over the promise of life renewed that restores connection and a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves.

But to rejoice over God's life and love and power, to receive God's presence, both inspires and requires a response, namely to practice freely and fiercely the hard work of forgiveness and healing and reconciliation, not one day of the year, but every day of the year.

What we experience tonight is thrilling, but it cannot compare with the ecstasy of a ruptured relationship being mended.

Christmas means something else, too. It is not just a birthday party for Jesus. It's also a celebration of our second birthday, when we are spiritually born again, if we choose to accept that gift. However, just as with any birthday, our second birthday involves more than just a single moment in time. Being born again does not require some intense emotional experience, though sometimes that happens, and it's very nice. No, being reborn is a process.

Each day, we are given the responsibility to make a choice to stay stuck or move forward. Every day we're offered a choice to be humble and generous or prideful and superior and selfish. We're given a choice to be merciful and kind or cruel and apathetic. Every day brings a fresh opportunity to either go on an adventure or muddle through life as usual. Our choices make a difference between being freed or feeling trapped, of abiding in peace or seething with anger and hatred. Our choice makes the difference between living with hope and joy or futility and despair and cynicism.

Making that crucial daily choice between celebrating and honoring two birthdays, not just one, isn't easy. In fact, we cannot choose wisely without God's grace nudging us along. And these aren't black-and-white, either/or categories. Nobody's has ever been 100% kind, and hopefully no one will ever make it to 100% cruel, but being born again means moving the needle as best we can toward the love that makes life worthwhile.

We can be shepherds who guide and guard, who humbly listen and seek out Jesus and share the story of his love. But maybe you're not a big shepherd fan. So we can make rough journeys, like Mary and Joseph, the magi – they're on their way right now. We can make those

rough journeys, trusting in God, taking things as they come, even when that means winding up in a place like a manger that stinks.

We can offer our lives as a gift to God in response to the blessing of new and abundant life we receive in Jesus. Every day, a choice: a choice, because we've been made free, and each day that we choose new life, each day we choose rebirth, that's a Merry Christmas and a Happy Birthday to you. Amen.