

Getting Ready for Christmas

A collection of four Advent/Christmas messages, plus a Christmas Eve devotional. The messages in this series include:

Are You Ready for Christmas? (Luke 3:2-11)

Advent Economics (Luke 3:2-18)

The Rest of the Christmas Story (Matthew 2:13-23)

Christmas Flesh (John 1:1-5, 14)

Christmas Eve Devotional: Christmas Truce (Luke 2:8-14)

Are You Ready for Christmas?

Luke 3:2-11

Last week a checkout clerk asked me, “Are you ready for Christmas yet?” I said “No, but I’m working on it.” This is the time of year to get ready for Christmas. There are Christmas cards to send, Christmas parties to attend, Christmas gifts to buy and wrap, Christmas trees to decorate, Christmas cookies to bake, and much more. This is the time of year when people prepare for Christmas.

Getting ready for Christmas is what Advent is all about. Advent, as you probably know, is a time of preparing for Christmas, a time of spiritual preparation for the arrival of the Messiah. That’s why, during Advent, we turn to stories about John the Baptist. It was John the Baptist’s job to help people get ready for the coming of Christ. We see that in today’s text. John was preaching in the wilderness, saying, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” What did John mean by that? How do we prepare the way of the Lord? How do we get ready for Christmas? The people who listened to John asked that same question. They said, “What should we do then, to get ready for the coming of the Lord?” And John answered them. But John didn’t say anything about purchasing gifts, or decorating the tree, or sending out Christmas letters. Instead, John said, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none.” And, “whoever has food must share with someone who doesn’t.” In other words, we prepare for the coming of the Lord by helping other people, especially those in need.

Jesus said the same thing. In Matthew 25, Jesus talks about the coming of Christ—not the first coming—but the second coming. And Jesus tells us how we should prepare for it. We prepare for the coming of the Lord by feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the poor, visiting the sick, and the like. Jesus said, “To the extent that you serve others, you also serve me.” So how do we get ready for the coming of the Lord? According to John the Baptist, and according to Jesus Christ, we prepare for Christmas by helping other people. We prepare for the coming of Christ by offering tangible, concrete service and ministry to others.

Several years ago, I heard about a Methodist church in North Carolina that learned that lesson in a vivid way. This church, concerned about homeless people in their town, especially during the winter months, spearheaded a program to help. They, along with fourteen other churches in their city, committed to care for homeless people for one week each winter. Each church opened up its facilities, usually the fellowship hall, to care for about eighteen to twenty homeless guests. Their job was to provide them with a warm and safe place to sleep, meals, and other needs for the entire week.

In early November the cooperating churches had their final organizational meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to schedule a specific week for each church for the winter months. The United Methodist pastor planned to go to the meeting, but she was busy, so she asked a woman from her church to go in her place. This woman, a new Christian and new church member, was an enthusiastic and devoted layperson. The pastor gave her a list of convenient weeks in January and February for their congregation to care for the homeless group. The pastor told her, “Make sure to schedule us for one of these weeks.”

The woman went to the meeting. But not long into the meeting, they reached an impasse. Not one of the fifteen cooperating churches was willing to take Christmas week. First, it interfered with all their Christmas activities, including Christmas Eve services. Second, everybody knew their members would not want to cook meals and provide other services for homeless folks during the Christmas holidays. This woman, an enthusiastic new Christian believer, was dumbfounded. She could not believe that none of the churches would take Christmas week. In fact, the more they argued about which church was going to have to take Christmas, the madder this woman got. Before she knew it, she smashed her hand down on the table, stood up, and gave a speech. “I can’t believe this,” she exclaimed. “Jesus and his family were homeless in Bethlehem on the very first

Christmas, and yet not one church in this community is willing to care for homeless people during the week of Christmas. Shame on you!”

The pastors all felt ashamed. But not ashamed enough to volunteer for the week of Christmas! When nobody volunteered, this laywoman boldly proclaimed, “My church, the First United Methodist Church, will take Christmas week, not only this year but every year.” One of the pastors said, “So moved.” Another said, “I’ll second that.” After a quick vote, the meeting adjourned.

After the meeting was over, this woman went to see her pastor. She was excited. She said, “I have great news! Our church gets to care for homeless people during the week of Christmas, not only this year but every year! Isn’t that great?” Well, that wasn’t exactly great news to the pastor. What about their Christmas Eve services? How would they find volunteers to cook and care for homeless people during the holidays? No, this was not good news at all to the pastor. In fact, she was sorry she had not gone to the meeting herself. But what could she do? It was a done deal.

The next Sunday the pastor gave the news to her congregation. She said, “We are going to host homeless people during the week of Christmas, and we need a bunch of volunteers to help.” She didn’t think she would get any response, but she was wrong. People came out of the woodwork to volunteer. Families with young children volunteered, saying to the pastor, “We want our kids to know there is more to Christmas than getting presents.” Families who had lost loved ones during the year volunteered, hoping to fill the void of the Christmas season. In fact, the pastor got more volunteers than she could use. Christmas week finally arrived. Eighteen homeless people came to the Methodist church to spend the week. And much to this pastor’s surprise, it ended up being the highlight of the year for the church.

People brought in tons of food all week long. The homeless guests ate like kings. Church members also brought nice clothes and coats for them to wear. They brought gifts for everyone, especially the children. And they didn’t just give food and clothes and gifts; they gave of themselves as well. People stayed for hours to visit with the group. They ate meals with them and played games with them. They even had a marathon, three-day-long Monopoly tournament! Many members spent one or more nights during the week. The church members got to know these people as *real* people. Although they were not required to go, all eighteen of the homeless guests went to the Christmas Eve Candlelight

Communion service. They were warmly welcomed by the entire congregation, and everyone in attendance had a holy moment. In fact, the whole week turned out to be a glorious experience for the church, and it continued to be that way for the next five years.

This story has an unusual ending. After six years of hosting homeless folks during the week of Christmas, the Methodist pastor got a phone call from the Baptist pastor. He said, “You know, everyone in this town has heard about how much fun your church has hosting the homeless group at Christmas. So we were wondering, would you be willing to share that week with some of the other churches? We were hoping we could do Christmas week this year.”

This Methodist church in North Carolina learned something very profound through this experience. They learned that Christmas is more than spending time with friends and family, more than eating good food, more than receiving gifts, more than going to Christmas worship services. This church learned that Christmas is really about ministry, about caring for people in the name of Jesus, not only at Christmas but year round. “Prepare the way of the Lord” said John the Baptist. And how do we do that? How do we get ready for Christmas? By being a servant for others. Not only at Christmas, but throughout the entire year.

Advent Economics

Luke 3:2-18

Last week a church member emailed me a story about a little boy named Johnny. One morning, Johnny's mother was working in the kitchen. She looked out the open window and saw her son Johnny playing church with his cat. Johnny had the cat sitting quietly while Johnny preached to him. Johnny's mom smiled at the scene and returned to her work. A little while later Johnny's mom heard a loud, wild meowing and hissing. She ran back to the open window and saw Johnny baptizing his cat in a tub of water. She called out, "Johnny, stop that! The cat is afraid of water! Johnny looked at her and said, "He should have thought about that before he joined my church." The name of the story was "Johnny the Baptist."

Today we are going to talk again about John the Baptist. As most of you know, John the Baptist was the prophet who, over 2,000 years ago, prepared Israel for the coming of Jesus Christ. So, during the Advent season, we always turn to John the Baptist as we prepare for the coming of Christmas. This year, as I re-read the story of John the Baptist in Luke's gospel, I was struck at how much John's ancient message relates to today's economy. Since all of us are talking about and thinking and worried about the economy, it seemed an appropriate topic. Please turn to the listening guide (see below) in your order of worship, and let's see what John the Baptist might say about today's economic environment.

The first thing John would say about today's economy is: 1. Repent from your sins. As we see in these verses, John preached a message of repentance. And goodness knows there is plenty of sin to repent of in today's economy. Who needs to repent? Lenders who made irresponsible loans. People who borrowed more money than they could afford. Government regulators who fell asleep at the wheel or worse, looked the other way. Brokers who sold questionable and toxic investments and called them safe. And all of us who buy too much, borrow too freely, and save too little. We need to repent. And true repentance is not just feeling guilty about bad behavior, but *changing* that bad behavior. Hopefully, one benefit of today's economic mess is that we will be more economically responsible in the future.

The second thing John would say about today's economy is: 2. Remember that God, not the economy, is ultimate. During the first Advent, as you can see in these verses, John

reminded his listeners to make God, and nothing else (including the market), their first priority. I know we are all worried about the economy, and rightfully so. But we must remember that we don't worship and serve the economy. We worship and serve God, the Lord of the universe. The Dow Jones Industrial Average didn't create the heavens and the earth and give us the gift of life. The S & P 500 didn't die on the cross on our behalf. The Nasdaq didn't rise up from the grave on the 3rd day. Our 401K plan won't walk us through the valley of the shadow of death. God's salvation and sustaining power is not tied to The New York Stock Exchange, or to the housing market, or the unemployment index. In hard economic times, it's imperative for us to remember that God alone, and not the economy, is ultimate.

The third thing John would say about today's economy is 3. Be content with the basics. Ultimately, the heart of today's economic crisis is greed. We are in the shape we are in because we want more and more and more stuff, far beyond our ability to pay for it. John the Baptist says we don't need all that stuff. It certainly doesn't make us happy. Researchers have proven that once our basic needs are met, more material possessions have almost no impact on our happiness. Instead, all that stuff clutters our life, damages our soul, hurts the environment, and keeps us from sharing with others in need. So John challenges us, like he challenged the soldiers in this text, to be content with the basic needs of life. If we have enough to eat, and decent shelter, and clothes to wear, we have enough. I mean, how many clothes does a person really need? How many pairs of shoes? How many ties or purses? How much jewelry does a person need? How many toys do kids really need? How many video games? How many square feet do we really need in our house? Do we really need a new high end car every few years? How big does our big screen TV need to be? Do we really need a TV in every room, and do we really need HBO and Showtime and 200 other channels of mostly worthless programming? How much money should we spend on sporting events? Do we really need an expensive vacation every year? Closer to home, how many books does a person really need? If we are not careful, our possessions can take over our lives. I know a couple in another state who built a lovely home many years ago. Then, not content with the house, they added an addition bigger than the original home. Now they spend virtually all their spare time and money on that house. They clean it and mow it and landscape it and insure it and heat and cool it and repair it and on and on. Their whole life revolves around that house, sucking their energy away from anything truly significant and meaningful. If we are not careful, our possessions end up possessing us. So, John says, live a more simple life. Be content with the basic material needs of life and focus more on ultimate values like relationships

with God and other people. In our consumerist culture, we desperately need to heed John's call to be satisfied with the basic material needs of life.

Finally, John the Baptist would say, 4. Generously give of your resources. Before I comment on this, let me make a disclaimer. Some people here today are in severe economic crisis. Some of you have lost your job, or have serious medical expenses that are bankrupting you, or are experiencing severe downturns in your business. And God knows that, and God will help you walk through these tough times. If you are in financial crisis, God does not expect you to generously give of your resources, because you don't have any to give. But most of us are not in that shape. Most of us here today, even in lean times, even with a hit in our pension funds, still have income and still have resources we can share. As John mentions in these verses, most of us have an extra coat in the closet and extra food in the pantry. And if so, God expects us to share. But the sad reality is that American Christians are not sharing very much. In fact, the statistics are absolutely dismal. For example, recent research shows that one fourth of American Protestants don't give a dime to charity of any kind, either church or secular. One out of four gives absolutely nothing. That's almost unbelievable. And, those of us who do give don't give much. Most American Protestants, including United Methodists, give less than 2% of their income to church and secular charities, and that was *before* the recent economic problems hit. This is heartbreaking to me. For us to spend over 98 % of our income on ourselves, when millions of children go to bed hungry every night, is scandalous. But it's even worse than that. That 2% charitable giving figure is skewed by a small number of people who give large amounts of money. So in reality, the average American Protestant actually gives less than one percent of their income to charity. Even more tragic, the more money people make the less percentage of their income they give away. For example, people who make less than \$15,000 dollars a year give away a far larger percentage of their income than people who make \$50,000 or \$75,000 or more dollars a year. That should not be! I've shared with you before that I, like many pastors, don't look at giving contributions from our congregation. Some pastors do, some don't, and a good case can be made for both. One reason I don't look at giving records is because I don't want to be overly influenced by the biggest givers. I don't ever want to be tempted to cater to our largest contributors. I want to treat all members the same, whether they give a hundred dollars a year to church, or twenty thousand dollars. But the *main* reason I don't look at contribution records is that I don't want to be disappointed in people that I love and serve as pastor. I don't look at contribution records because I don't want to have bad feelings about how little people give. The fact is, our congregation, like all middle and upper

middle class congregations, should give dramatically more money than we do. Not just to church, but to other charities. The fact that most of us give less than 2% of our income, some far less than 2%, is a serious spiritual problem. We desperately need to heed John the Baptist and become generous givers. And, that is going to be even more important over this next year. In these recessionary times, the need for charitable giving is going to rise. Since some of us in this church are in economic crisis, and cannot give much next year, the rest of us need to make up the difference. And, since a growing number of people in our country lack the basics of food, clothing, shelter, medical care and utilities, we are going to need to give more money to The Salvation Army, and the Community Help Center, and Brooks House, and Potter's House, and other charities. The good news is that when we do give generously, we are blest. When we give, we find joy. When we give, we please God, and help others, and enrich our lives beyond measure. Please read these verses with me one more time, "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two coats should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same" (v. 10-11).

If John the Baptist were here today, he would have much to say about today's economy. But at the very least, he would say: 1. Repent from your sins. 2. Remember that God, not the economy, is ultimate. 3. Be content with the basics. 4. Generously give of your resources. May God help you, and may God help me, to live out John's Advent Economics.

LISTENING GUIDE

Advent Economics

Luke 3:2-18

1. _____ from your _____.

“He went into all the country around Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ... “John said to the crowds ... produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” (v. 3, 8)

2. Remember that _____, not the _____, is _____.

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him ... One more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” (v. 4, 16)

3. Be _____ with the _____.

“Soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “... be content with your pay.” (v. 14)

4. Generously _____ of your _____.

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “The man with two coats should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” (v. 10-11)

The Rest of the Christmas Story

Matthew 2:13-23

How many of you have seen the musical, *Fiddler On The Roof*? It tells the story of a Jewish family who lived in a little Jewish community in pre-Revolutionary Russia. *Fiddler* is a classic musical, full of delightful songs. Who can forget those great songs such as “Tradition?” That song reminds me of some churches I’ve served in! Some of the other beloved songs include “Matchmaker,” “Sunrise, Sunset,” and “Miracle of Miracles.” One of the most enjoyable songs is, “If I Were a Rich Man.” It begins with the main character, a poor milkman named Tevye, talking to a young man about money. The young man says that money is the root of all evil, that money is a disease. Tevye looks at this boy and says, “Then may God smite me with it, and may I never recover!” Then he begins singing those famous words, “If I were a rich man...” Most of us know the story and the music. Well, many years ago, my family and I rented and watched *Fiddler on the Roof*. The next morning our daughter Laura, who was eleven years old at the time, put the movie back on and started watching it once again. Although I was in another room working at my computer, I enjoyed listening again to those great old songs. However, about two thirds through the movie, Laura stopped the movie and put it back into the box. I said, “Laura, aren’t you going to finish the movie?” “No,” she replied, “I am not.” “Why not?” “Because,” she said, “it’s too sad.” Well, *Fiddler On The Roof* does have a sad ending. The entire Jewish community is forced to leave their homes and community, simply because they were Jews. It is a sad ending, so I understood my daughter’s decision to stop the movie at the two thirds mark and not watch the conclusion.

As I read Matthew’s Christmas story, I feel exactly like my daughter. I’d rather stop Matthew’s Christmas narrative about two thirds of the way through. That’s the good part. That’s the part about the great star shining over Bethlehem, and the wise men worshipping Jesus and giving him gifts. There we find Mary and Joseph and Jesus safely secure in the manger. This is Christmas! If we just had an evergreen tree with lights and Christmas carols in the background, it would be perfect. This is the Christmas story we like to hear. This is what Christmas is about.

But that warm and fuzzy image is not the whole Christmas story according to Matthew. No, that’s only about two thirds of the story. Like my daughter, I’d like to turn off the movie and not see the rest of the story. However, to be fair to Matthew’s narrative, we need to follow the story to the end.

Let's look again at our text. Remember, the wise men have just left, and Mary and Joseph are still basking in the glory, excitement and warmth of that wonderful event. But now, all of a sudden, the story takes a dramatic turn. (Read v. 13) The news comes that Herod wants to kill their baby. Can you imagine someone wanting to kill your child? This is not a happy story. It continues by saying (read v. 14-15) So, Mary and Joseph have to escape by the dark of night, running to save the life of their newborn child from an oppressive, power-hungry, sick man named Herod. Not only do they have to run, they have to flee to a foreign country and live as refugees in a strange land. As bad as that is, it gets even worse. Let's read on. (read v. 16-18) This has to be one of the most horrible passages in all of scripture. This doesn't sound like Christmas at all. At Christmas we want to sing songs like "Away in a Manger" and "Silent Night." But here, the only songs being sung are the cries of Rachel, "weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." I'm with my daughter. I'd rather turn off the movie and not watch the end of the story. However, things do seem to get better. (read v. 19-20) Finally, things are looking up. Mary and Joseph and Jesus can finally go home. New hope begins to swell in their hearts. But look on. (read v. 21-23) Well, they can't go home after all. Instead, they are forced to go to a new place and make a new home in a place called Nazareth.

This is not a happy story. It's no wonder that when we read Matthew's Christmas story, we usually stop at the visit of the wise men. This text doesn't feel much like Christmas. It's a sad story, it's a tragic story.

But if we're honest, it's also our story, at least some of the time. We too are sometimes pushed around by powerful Herods. We too sometimes witness the slaughter of the innocents. The diagnosis of cancer, the collapse of marriages, the hard news of layoffs, young men and women killed in war, young people being killed in car wrecks, and the list goes on and on. We may not like the story in this text, but we are familiar with it. We watch it played out most every night on the evening news.

And as a community of faith we have to ask, "Where is God in this story?" *Is* God in this story? Can God's presence be found in this kind of tragedy? I'll be perfectly honest with you. Seeing God in sad stories like this text is not easy. It takes eyes of faith. But, if we look carefully, we can see the hand of God, or at least His fingerprints. At least Matthew could. Look again at the text. (read v. 15b, v. 17, v. 23b) In the midst of all this tragedy, Matthew affirms that God was still at work. In spite of incredible human sin and pain and brokenness, God was still engaged in the story, working to bring good out of terrible

events. It's certainly not clear cut and obvious, but if we have the eyes to see, if we look carefully, God's hand can be seen.

[Note: At this point it would strengthen the sermon to mention a recent tragic event, nationally or locally, and tell where you saw God in the story. When I preached this sermon years ago, terrible floods had recently killed large numbers of people in Central America, so I used that story] Like most of you, I watched with terror and grief as thousands of people were killed in recent floods in Central America. Like you, I saw images of lifeless children being pulled out of the mud. Such a situation is almost more than I can comprehend. With our own eyes we saw the slaughter of the innocents. Once again, "a voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more."

Is it possible to see God at work in something as horrible as the flooding in Central America? I believe Matthew would say yes, that if we have the eyes to see, God's activity can be seen even there. Do you remember how thousands upon thousands of people responded with love and compassion? Food and clothes were sent to help. Millions of dollars were contributed. Thousands of volunteers from all over the world went to Central America to help in the rescue and rebuilding efforts. And, do you remember watching the television interviews of the survivors? Many of them talked of God and faith. They talked about how their faith was sustaining them through this nightmare of death and loss. Did we see terror and pain and death in Central America this year? Absolutely. But, for those with eyes to see, God's presence and activity could also be seen.

I'll be honest with you. I don't care much for this passage of scripture. Who wants to read about Rachel weeping for her children? Especially at Christmas. It's a tragic text indeed. But it's here for a purpose. It would be a mistake to stop Matthew's Christmas story at the two thirds point. You see, we need this story. Even the tragic side. For this story reminds us that regardless of what comes: accidents, cancer, divorce, death, broken dreams, floods ... *whatever* comes, God is still at work, God is still alive, God is still involved in our broken world and our broken lives.

We don't just see this truth at the beginning of Jesus' life. We also see it at the end of his life. Just as tragedy came at his birth, it also came at his death. At the cross of our Lord we once again hear a mother weeping, not Rachel this time but Mary, "weeping for her child and refusing to be comforted, because he was no more." And yet, the gospel teaches

us that even at Christ's crucifixion, even at this horrible moment in history, God was at work, bringing redemption out of brokenness.

The birth and death of Jesus reminds us that even in death, tragedy and brokenness, God can bring hope, redemption and resurrection. Even when Rachel weeps for her children. Even when Mary weeps for her child as he dies on the cross. For if we look carefully, even among the tears and the sound of Rachel weeping, we can see the hand of God even in, no—especially in—the brokenness of life.

Christmas Flesh

John 1:1-5, 14

Several years ago I read about a Catholic priest who served as a chaplain for a Roman Catholic retreat center. His supervisors told him to commission a painting of the Virgin Mary to hang in the gathering room of the retreat center, which he did. However, when his superiors visited the retreat center and saw the painting of Mary, they were not happy. Not only did they remove the painting from the room, they also removed this priest from his post. They said he was not competent to hold the position. What caused all this trouble? The painting depicted Mary in her mid-teens, as she almost certainly was at the birth of Jesus. And she was depicted as being very pregnant. In fact, she looked about eight months pregnant. The church officials said the painting was irreverent. Never mind that the Gospel of Luke says that Mary was “great with child.” A few months later a new painting of the Virgin Mary was hanging on the wall. It was still the Virgin Mary. But in this picture she was about thirty years old and she showed no signs of being pregnant. She had a halo over her head and she was incredibly beautiful. In fact, she looked like a movie star. (*The Cherry Log Sermons*, Fred Craddock, p. 99-100)

Many of us would like Christmas to be like that second painting of Mary. We would like Christmas to be beautiful and perfect and lovely. We would like Christmas to be free of problems and conflict. We would like Mary and Joseph and Jesus to look like movie stars, with halos over their head, nestled in a beautiful, snow covered chalet. But that kind of picture perfect Christmas is far removed from the reality of the first Christmas. The truth is—the first Christmas was a very messy affair. It began with a scandal. A young, unwed teenage girl gets pregnant, with all the ensuing gossip, especially in that day. The story continues with Mary and Joseph, a poor young peasant couple, making a hard journey to Bethlehem. Why? Because the Roman Emperor wanted to squeeze even more tax dollars from a hard pressed, struggling, poor nation. Mary and Joseph finally arrived in Bethlehem. Soon after they arrived, Mary went into labor, but there was no room in any of the inns. So, they had to go to a stable. There was nothing romantic about that stable—it stank of animals. Then came the blood, sweat and tears of labor and natural childbirth—with no epidural and no Demerol. Finally, Jesus was born. A group of lowly shepherds showed up—the absolute bottom of the labor chain. These visitors were definitely not the movers and shakers of Jerusalem. They weren’t even members of the Chamber of Commerce. Later, some pagan astrologers showed up. Then, a ruthless and insecure King named Herod, in an attempt to kill any threat to his throne, annihilated all

the little boys of Bethlehem. The fact is, the first Christmas was a very messy, very painful, very human story. And if you follow the story line, you learn that when Jesus grew up, that messy story continued. Jesus knew great love and joy and friendship and laughter. But Jesus also knew great conflict and struggle and pain. And when he was only 30 years old, the powers that be turned on him. He ended up being executed on a cross, with blood and pain and death and cries of abandonment.

Did you hear the scripture reading today? It says, “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” That is probably *the* most remarkable claim in all of Scripture. You see, Christmas tells us that God is not a distant God. God is not an aloof God. God is not detached from real living. Instead, God fully entered human history, with all its beauty, joy and splendor, and with all its pain, conflict and struggle. God began his life on earth as a vulnerable baby and he died on a bloody cross. God understands human flesh. God is a God who totally immersed himself into humanity—and continues to do so today. The word became flesh and made his home among us. God is a God of the real world! God can be found in the love of a parent for their child. But God can also be found in the fighting and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan. God can be found in compassionate acts of service and in love and in laughter. But God can also be found in cancer wards and in violent, drug infested ghetto streets. God can be found in loving and healthy homes. But God can also be found in strained and broken and grieving and hurting homes. The message of Christmas is profound. God is a God of real life. A God of flesh and bones. A God of joy and pain and life and death. “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Christmas is a remarkable affirmation that God cares about real people and real life. Christmas tells us that God fully engages the world—including our world.

Today’s text reminds me of a nurse I once heard about. She was only 42 years old, but she was already bitter, tired, and resentful. About eight months earlier her husband had left her with three mouths to feed: twin girls about twelve, and a bright aggressive boy of 16 who was driving her crazy. It was almost Christmas and she was working a lot of overtime, partly because she was needed at the hospital, and partly because she needed the extra money for Christmas. She had the flu at Thanksgiving but had not taken time to recuperate, and now she was even more tired and run down than usual. Everything seemed to be going wrong, her life was coming apart at the seams. Her father, who lived in an out-of-town nursing home, fell and broke his hip, and wanted her to come and be with him. She wanted to go, but didn’t have the time or money to make the trip. Nor did she have enough money to buy the presents her children wanted for Christmas. Then one

evening she was cleaning her son's room and she discovered some marijuana in his books. They had a great fight about that. It ended with him shouting, "It's all your fault that dad left!" She was awake most of the night, crying, angry, and unhappy. The next day was one of those impossible days at the hospital, days you want to forget. Blow ups with a couple of irritable patients. A run-in with a floor nurse. A charming old lady dying in an operation. A collision with an orderly that sent a meal tray crashing to the floor. Nothing went right. "Life," she said to herself, "is hell."

On her way home, wondering how she would manage with her son, she heard the sound of carols coming from a little church next to the hospital. This nurse was a Christian believer, but lately, she had been disappointed with God. She almost passed the church, then stopped, turned around, and went in, as if some power beyond herself were drawing her. She sat on a back pew. Children in bathrobes were staging the nativity scene. She noticed that the baby in Mary's arms was not a doll. It was a real baby. She saw it raise its hand and try to grab the girl's nose. After another reading and another hymn, the baby became restless and began to cry. The girl cradled it, tried to soothe it, but it squaled. The little boy standing at the pulpit could not be heard reading his part. Finally a woman came up onto the stage and took the baby from the girl to quiet it. The nurse assumed it was the baby's mother. The baby still would not be consoled. Finally, the woman carried the wailing baby out of the sanctuary as the little congregation was singing, "Silent Night."

At that moment something lit up in the nurse's eyes and she smiled. He was a real baby she thought. Jesus was a real baby! It wasn't just a story. He was real. He cried. He wet. He caused his mother anguish. This was an epiphany for her—God cares about real life! Enough so to enter the world as a real live vulnerable baby. As she slipped out of the church into the night air, buttoning her coat, there was radiance about her face. She smiled at people in the street. She stopped for groceries and even bought some peppermint ice cream for dessert. When she entered her apartment she decorated it for Christmas. That night she was almost like a child again, bringing laughter and joy into her home. Her problems were certainly not all solved—not at all. She still had to figure out how to be single again. She still had financial problems. She still had to deal with her son. But seeing that real live crying baby at the church reminded her that the God of real life was with her. And because of that she knew she could face whatever came.

Christmas tells us that God is never removed from the messiness of human experience. Christmas tells us that God is a God of real life. For the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Emmanuel has come. The God of real life is with us. Thanks be to God.

Christmas Eve Devotional

Christmas Truce

Luke 2:8-14

A woman was frantically doing her last minute Christmas shopping, just two days before Christmas. In tow was her little four-year-old daughter. The woman dragged her daughter from store to store, fighting the crowds, in a rush, tired, and becoming more irritable by the minute. Finally, they made their last stop. As they walked out of the store, the mother said to her daughter, “Did you see that. That man at the checkout counter gave me a mean face.” The daughter said, “No mommy, you had a mean face *before* you went into the store.” Most of us can relate. Instead of being a joyful season, Christmas can sometimes seem more like a battleground.

Speaking of Christmas and battlegrounds, I want to tell you a Christmas war story. This is a true story from the days of World War I. Way back in the year 1914, on Christmas Eve, when the world was fighting WWII, an interesting thing happened on the western front. It was miserably cold, with temperatures below freezing and snow all over. Well, on that Christmas Eve, all across the German lines, lights begin to appear. At first the British thought the Germans were preparing to attack. But instead of rifle fire, sounds of singing drifted across no man’s land. In fact, the British soldiers could hear the German soldiers singing, “Silent Night.” The British responded by singing a Christmas Carol of their own. This singing of Christmas carols went on, back and forth, for some time. After each song, the opposing troops applauded the other side’s singing. Then, the troops began lobbing food into the opposing trenches. After that a few makeshift Christmas trees were erected and in the darkness you could see candles burning on the trees. The next morning, on Christmas day, a few soldiers poked their heads above the trenches, but nobody shot a round. One German captain stepped out into no man’s land—the land between the trenches. Nobody fired a shot. Then a British officer did the same. The two men met each other face to face, introduced themselves, and saluted each other. By now, soldiers on both sides were wildly cheering. It was clear that nobody would die that day. An unofficial truce had been called. Throughout the day both sides collected their dead and buried them. At one point in no man’s land, soldiers from both sides gathered to honor their fallen. Together they read the 23rd Psalm, in both German and English: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”

The next morning, on December 26th, at 8:30 AM, a British captain fired three shots into the air. He then raised a flag that said, “Merry Christmas.” The Germans responded by hanging out a sheet that said, “Thank You.” The German Captain and the British Captain both stood up from the trench, bowed and saluted each other, shot into the air, and the war was on once again.

On this Christmas Eve, you and I are not soldiers in war, but most of us are fighting a battle of some kind. Maybe a battle with illness, or a battle to save our marriage, or a battle with our children, or a battle in our job, or a financial battle, or a battle with religious doubt, or one of a hundred other battles. And as Christians we are all engaged in a battle, or at least we should be. As soldiers of the Kingdom of God, we are called daily to battle against injustice and human suffering of all kinds. But at Christmas, God gives us a break in the fighting. God give us a truce from the war. On Christmas Eve and Christmas day, God lets us stop the fighting and enjoy the gift of Christmas. During this reprieve, this time of R and R, God reminds us that we are not alone in the world. He reminds us that Emmanuel has come, that God is with us no matter what battles we face. And God also reminds us that we are part of a family—part of a fellowship of believers who are called to support one another. On this night God lets us sing the songs of Christmas, and hear the story of Jesus, and gather around the table for the sacrament of Holy Communion, and light candles in celebration of Jesus, the Light of the World. Christmas is a glorious time for Christian believers. Oh, I know, the day after Christmas, on December 26th, we’ll have to enter the battle once again, that’s just the way life is. But tonight, for just a moment, God has called a truce. Let us enjoy the reprieve. Let us celebrate the coming of Emmanuel, and be glad. Amen.

[This story comes from a 1996 Public Television series about WW1 called “The Great War.”]