

"At Christmas Time"
Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:1-20 Titus 2:11-14

PRAYER OF PRAISE

O God we come to adore you this night. God of peace, to you we ascribe all honor and majesty, beauty and strength. You sent forth a child whom we call blessed, upon whose shoulders rests the destiny of nations. Through him you gave us the gift of life everlasting, and a wonderful counselor who shall guide all your people. With Shepherds and angels, we lift our voices rejoicing; All glory to you in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom you dwell. In the name of him who came we pray. Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 9:2-7

Isaiah proclaims darkness reigns everywhere. Yet the people have seen a great light::the presence of God. The darkness will be lifted. A child will come that will reign over all. Hear the words of the prophet Isaiah from chapter 9 verses 2-7.

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 2:1-20

Let us hear the story of the birth of the one Isaiah prophesied would come, who needs no introduction from Luke 2:1-20.

Let us pray.

O God of peace, to you we ascribe all honor and majesty, beauty and strength. You bring forth a child whom we call blessed, upon whose shoulders rests the destiny of nations. You give us the gift of life everlasting, a wonderful counselor who shall guide all your people, with Shepherds and angels, we lift our voices rejoicing; all glory to you in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom you dwell. Speak to us through your word as once again we hear the story of your coming to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. Amen.

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A five-year-old was showing his Christmas presents to grandma when she asked, "Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?"

The little fellow thought for a moment before answering, "No, I didn't, Grandma. But that's OK. It wasn't my birthday."

We gather tonight to on the Eve before the day the church around the world celebrates whose birthday it is. We do so in honor of the birth of the child who was born to become King of kings, Lord of lords, and President of presidents, Prime Minister of prime ministers, Chancellor of chancellors and the Good Shepherd of sheep.

It never ceases to amaze me that around this world on this night people of every age and race and language are bowing and giving thanks for a baby born long ago in

Bethlehem of Judea. Driving around this afternoon I heard Rick Steves interviewing people from other nations about their customs and one of the most interesting to me was the Netherlands or Holland. It all starts the second Saturday of November when Sinterklaas travels to a city or town in the Netherlands. Dutch tradition says that St. Nicholas lives in Madrid Spain and every year he chooses a different harbor to arrive in Holland, so as many children as possible get a chance to see him. For the children there December 5th is the night before St. Nicholas birthday that Sinterklaas brings them presents. They don't get any presents on Christmas. They just worship.

Tonight, we are here to just worship. Like the shepherds who heard the news that night and went to find him, we too humble ourselves before the child born to be the savior.

There is a temptation to keep the babe in the manger. There is a temptation to come to church on Christmas Eve and worship this babe and then to return to our real world lives and to ignore the fact that the Bethlehem babe became a man a man who turned over the money-changers' tables in the temple, the man who lived his life for others, the man who loved the unlovable, cleansed the leper, washed the feet of his disciples, gave his life for us sinners and on the third day was raised from the dead.

There is a temptation to forget that this man Jesus calls us to follow him all year long, to love our enemies, to do good to those who mistreat us, to seek to live the kingdom life every day that we walk this earth, always seeking to live as he would have us live. It's all right if sentimentally we want our children small so they can forever be a delight to us, but it is not all right if we want to forever keep the Christ child small so he won't inconvenience us, make demands on us.

The angel that announced the birth of the Messiah made no demands. It was the shepherds who took that task on themselves. When the skies cleared they said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

They went to where the angels had told them and when they had seen the Christ child for themselves, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about him, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

What a night that must have been! I wonder what happened to those shepherds. There is no mention of them again in the scriptures, but undoubtedly they were changed men.

What does it take to change men? What does it take to change women? What does it take to change children? What would it take to change the hearts of war hardened warriors?

Two Sundays ago 60 Minutes aired a segment about the change that has taken place in the country of Colombia.

"For more than 50 years, Colombia was one of the most violent and isolated countries on Earth. It was infamous for cartels, cocaine, and kidnapping. The Revolutionary

Armed Forces of Colombia or FARC fought the government in the longest running war in the Western hemisphere. Until recently, when Colombia achieved what many thought was impossible. The war is effectively over, the country transformed.

How do you end a 52-year war that left 220,000 dead and millions displaced against a revolutionary army dedicated to overthrowing the government? Billions in U.S. aid helped. But the Colombian military came up with one of the most unusual ideas in modern warfare: an advertising campaign. They hired a creative ad executive to convince thousands of fighters to give up without firing a shot. How did they do it? They did it with Christmas...

It was the power to change minds that brought Colombia's deputy minister of defense to an ad agency in 2006. The military had brought the Revolutionary Army to their knees but still they continued to fight and were not showing signs of stopping. So they started looking for a new weapon to end the fighting. So they asked one of the world's top ad men to create a series of campaigns and TV commercials to convince the guerillas to surrender and the Colombian people to accept them back.

On December 2010, they launched "Operation Christmas" which they filmed for commercials that played on local TV. At great risk, Black Hawk helicopters carried two ad men led by Colombian Special Forces -- into rebel territory. They found nine, 75-foot trees near guerilla strongholds and decorated them with Christmas lights. Each tree was rigged with a motion detector that lit up the tree and a banner when the guerillas walked by at night. It read:

"Si la navidad pudo llegar hasta la selva, usted tambien puede llegar hasta su casa." Desmovilcese. En Navidad todo es posible"

"If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home. Demobilize. At Christmas, everything is possible."

From that point on they never let up. They rolled out dozens of campaigns each uniquely designed to show the guerillas the way out with beams of light, stickers on trees, soccer balls signed by soccer stars, thousands of lighted balls with messages inside floating down rivers, and voices of ex-guerilla leaders booming across the jungle. But no voice was more powerful than their mothers.

In 2013, they found 27 mothers of guerrilla fighters. They gave his agency photos of their sons and daughters as young children that only they could recognize. During Christmas, flyers with those photos were placed all over the jungle. The message was

"Antes de ser gurillera eres mi hija" Esta Navidad Te Espero En Casa"

"Before you were a guerrilla, you were my child. So come home because I will always be waiting for you at Christmastime."

Over eight years, 18,000 guerillas put down their weapons and came home, in large part because of the campaigns. The ads helped bring the FARC to the negotiating table in 2012. During the peace talks, the guerilla leaders asked the government to stop airing his commercials. Soon after, they agreed to a ceasefire.

Colombia's spirit, once buried by war, has risen again. The voices of the mothers calling out to their children, some of whom had been gone for 20 years living in the jungle reached out to the little child in those fighters that had left so long ago. Come home we're waiting for you.

Some of you came this evening for the singing of the carols, to be with your family in a safe and loving place. Or maybe you came simply to keep the warm glow of the Christmas season alive just a little longer. Maybe you came because it's a tradition in your family. Maybe you came because you are sincerely searching for a connection or a reconnection with Jesus. Maybe you are here because you are hearing the voice of your mother saying, 'Come home. We're waiting for you. '

Maybe you need to hear your mother say, "Before you were a fighter you were my child." Maybe you need to hear your heavenly Father say, "Before you were an engineer, before you were a teacher, before you were a pastor, before you were a believer you were my child."

What is keeping you away from experiencing the love of Jesus? What is mobilized in your life that needs to be demobilized?

Jesus said, "Unless you become like a little child you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. What is it about little children that Jesus considers to be prerequisite to entrance to his realm? How about being trusting? How about believing? How about being dependent of others? How about being forgiving? How about being willing to share? How about loving?

What is keeping you from having the attitude of a little child, an attitude of trusting and hoping, and sharing and loving and forgiving and giving child that realizes even though he didn't get everything he wanted for Christmas that "It's OK.. "It's not his birthday anyway."

I pray that whatever your reason for being here, something might happen this night that will cause you to hear the voice of an angel saying, "Do not be afraid. Do NOT be afraid. Do not be AFRAID. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." That is something worth advertising. We are here because shepherds did just that.

Desmovilcese. En Navidad todo es posible." Demobilize. At Christmas, everything is possible. Esta Navidad Te Espero En Casa" ". So come home because I will always be waiting for you at Christmastime."

Let's pray. O Lord, giver of every good and perfect gift, we come rejoicing at the birth of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. We give you thanks that your light shines forth in the world. You illuminate our darkness, drive away the clouds of gloom and despair; you send for rays of hope to cheer us and warm us with the radiance of your redeeming love.

The carols we sing tell of your glory, how angels sang and shepherds watched as glory shone round them. We give thanks for the amazement and wonder of your revelation, the many ways you surprise us, and visit us and cause us to feel your presence.

The gifts we exchange are signs of your benevolence to us, how you came to earth and dwelt among us. The heavens are glad because of your presence, the earth rejoiced with the peace you promise.

The joy we feel reflects our blessed hope: the appearance in glory of our Savior Jesus Christ. We give thanks that he calls us to follow him and gives us the ministry of reconciliation to carry on in his name. At this time help us to reach out to those who feel no joy, for whom thanksgiving is difficult, Let us give them a beacon of light that will lead them to our gift of new life.

We pray for comfort for those who have lost loved ones since last Christmas. Tonight we pray for the family of Rev. Wendy Bailey, former pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Baytown who completed her baptism when she joined the church triumphant this week.

We pray for the family of Carol and Ginger Johnson in the loss of their newborn Great Granddaughter this week.

We give thanks for the Thomas family who lit our Advent wreath tonight. We thank you Lord that they were spared in a horrible automobile wreck last Saturday and are here tonight to worship with us.

Lord hear our prayers that we pray in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Monday Fodder

2. (Marina del Rey, CA: DeVorss & Co. Publishing, 1970), pp. 36-37.