

2017 Christmas Eve Sermon  
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen

## **Exactly Where Hope is Needed**

Please join me in the spirit of prayer. On this most holy night, may the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

Where do where do you look for Christmas? Is it in the great Black Friday deal from back in November, now wrapped with a bow? Christmas lights, familiar carols, holiday cookies, candy canes? Family plans or travel? A festive tree with presents spilling out from underneath?

For me this year, signs of Christmas were in getting all my Christmas slippers knitted and mailed out to family ... on time—a rare accomplishment! It was in the tree I got around to decorating and the stockings I hung at home. And, of course, it has been in sight for quite a while at MCC, as many hands have been busy preparing the rich feast of Christmas worship.

These are all wonderful and beloved parts of the holiday. But the question of where we look for Christmas is sometimes a different question than where we look for the birth of Christ. For you see, Jesus is born exactly where *hope* is most needed.

This was true two thousand years ago. Jesus was born into a community desperate for hope, suffering under Roman occupation. But while God's people

watched for signs of a Messiah among the powerful, Christ entered their world sideways—through the labor of a Palestinian Jewish woman in Bethlehem. He was born to the peasant class most in need of relief.

Tonight, in the same small town of Bethlehem—now walled off and suffering under a different occupation—Palestinian Christians boldly proclaim the Christmas story. They recognize the Messiah’s incarnation in their own resistance to empire through arts, education, advocacy, and partnerships. For you see, Jesus is born exactly where hope is most needed.

Two thousand years ago, an angel announced Jesus’ birth: “‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’”

What a glorious sight that must have been! What an amazing sound! Surely such an auspicious angel chorus sang on the Sabbath and in Jerusalem’s Temple, right? Not even! The angel’s proclamation came sideways, to a group of shepherds in the hills of Bethlehem. These were men who were watching their flocks in the night, keeping them safe from predators, as they did every night.

The great good news of the newborn Savior was given to unnamed people of

no particular importance. In fact, some scholars tell us that the shepherds were a class of people considered among those with the lowest status, for whom the onerous Empire's effects would be most acute. For you see, Jesus is born exactly where hope is most needed.

A different group of low-status men bore news of the Messiah to some of us last week. Thirteen middle school students from our Confirmation Class, along some mentors and parents and Pastor Nick and I, served a meal at the Porchlight shelter at Grace Episcopal Church downtown. After chaotic herding into cars and getting organized once we reached the shelter kitchen, they were gloved and ready to go. They did a great job! As person after person went through the line, our confirmation students graciously served them and spoke kind words, such as "Have a good evening!" The men, in turn, were profuse with their thanks.

The youth and adults in my carpool were jazzed. It had been a moving experience for them. I asked a few questions on the way home: What was your favorite part? What surprised you? Then, Where did you see Jesus? Hannah insightfully described seeing Jesus in the serving. The class has been learning about a humble Jesus who helped people in need. MJ astutely added that Jesus was also in the men who received the meal, remembering how Jesus himself had been born to a poor family. She thought that of all the people there that night, those without homes and needing a meal were most like Jesus.

At the shelter, we experienced Jesus' embodiment. For you see, Jesus is born

exactly where hope is most needed.

Heart-warming stories abound this time of year. For example, yesterday National Public Radio shared a story about victims of the wildfires that blazed through Santa Rosa, California, this past October.<sup>1</sup> Lewis and his 8-year-old daughter Lily were visiting their working class neighborhood that had been completely destroyed by the fire. They were there to erect a Christmas tree on the empty lot where their house used to be. In fact, several families had done the same thing because a local disaster response team provided the neighbors free trees and decorations.

The reporter described how red ribbons and shimmering silver tinsel defied the charred landscape, and Lily declared that the trees were “festive.” Her dad said, “The spirit of Christmas isn’t gone, even though the rest of my neighborhood is gone. Everybody here is the happiest they’ve been in months doing this.”

Lily crawled under her Christmas tree and looked up through the branches. “It gives me happy feelings . . .,” she said, “It makes me feel like our house is still standing. It’s not like we can’t ever see our house again. It will always be there. You just can’t see it. But I can feel it.”

Christ is appearing among the ashes of devastation in Santa Rosa, for you see, Jesus is born exactly where hope is most needed.

This Christmas, I hope you have many blessings for which to give thanks—a

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<sup>1</sup> NPR Weekend Edition, Dec 23, 2017

home that's still standing, the love of family and friends, good and plentiful food, the beauty of Christmas decorations, the joy of gifts given and received. In the fullness of all of this, God is surely present.

But I also encourage you not to turn away from the places in your own life, or in the lives of our neighbors or creation herself where hope is yet absent. Hearts are broken and bruised. People we love are sick; some are dying. Violence refuses to give up power. Political decisions come at the expense of the vulnerable. Creation cries out in pain. Isms separate us from one another and our humanity.

Some realities don't bend so easily to holiday cheer.

And still, as hard as it might be to believe, *these* are the mangers that will yet receive the newborn child. These are the places where the light *will* overcome the gloom of night. And these are the skies where the midwinter moans will be *replaced* by the sound of the angel's Gloria.

Watch. Wait. Participate. Keep in mind that the incarnation in places of pain is likely to happen sideways. This seems to be God's preferred way to work in the world.

God's coming will be unexpected. And the good news will be proclaimed first to the outcast. For you see, Jesus is born exactly where hope is most needed.

Thanks be to God!