

Merry Christmas from Rod and Johnelle, Vin and Carlos, Kirkland, Mary Sue, Emily, and Katie, Melissa, Jennifer, Camron, Isaiah, Jeffrey, Nikki, and Cleary. From our family to yours, a most blessed holy days!

**Would you like to hold the baby?**

*Isaiah 9:1-9*

*Luke 2:1-20*

**A Sermon by**

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Creation was the first Christmas – all the gifts of God poured out on a fragile but astounding ecosystem called EARTH. In the beginning, the earth was a formless void with darkness. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. Millions of lights from millions of galaxies. Gifts of beauty. The joy of aliveness. Make no mistake Creation was Christmas.

John, whose Gospel has no manger narrative, narrates Christmas for philosophers and theologians. After all, we need Christmas too. “What has come into **being** in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” James Autry, in his poem “Christmas,” says that every Christmas in their little country church in Mississippi the preacher would ask them to keep the spirit of Christmas all year long, and they would always promise to try. And so it goes, year after year – all of us trying, failing, and at times getting it right. It’s Christmas.

Imagine millions of years without a Christmas. Darkness and cold and death as if the White Witch of Narnia had cursed the land. After the disaster in the garden, where God’s gifts were trashed and discarded faster than our children ripping open presents under the tree, **humankind became the hopeless kind**. Then a couple named Abram and Sarah, in their old age, were given a son – Isaac, all the promise in the world. His name means, “Laughter.” God must have laughed out loud at this move, and I think it sounded like the laugh of James Earl Jones. “Unto us a son has been given.”

Imagine all those centuries of slavery in Egypt. And Moses thundered, “Let my people go.” And the people who walked in chains saw a great light of liberation.

Disaster piled on disaster like clods of dark dirt falling on a casket. In all those dark centuries, there’s **God passing out the gifts**: a small ark atop treacherous waves; a rainbow in the sky; manna and water in the

wilderness; Ten Words on twin tablets; a land of promise flowing with milk and honey. A Temple, priests, kings, and prophets.

There's a bumper sticker that asks, "How's that hopey changey thing working out for you?" I would like to answer the question posed by this tacky saying that now passes for political narrative: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." "If anyone is in Christ, he is the New Creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come." The air in Bethlehem was thick with hope and change.

Finally Christmas came to a small town named Bethlehem – a town often associated with burial rather than birth. A trio of faithful women is associated with Bethlehem. **Rachel** died while giving birth to Benjamin on the road to Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19). But Bethlehem was also the place of new beginnings for **Ruth**, a foreigner, a Moabite, who came to town with Naomi, her mother-in-law. Remember her affirmation of faith: Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried."

But we have a problem. Scripture passes out harsh judgment on Moab: No Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord for ever; because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 23:3-4). But here's Ruth, a Moabite, in Bethlehem, married to Boaz. Ruth gives birth to a son, and the women of Bethlehem name him Obed; the father of Jesse, the father of David, and at long last Jesus, of the house and lineage of David. Unto us a child is given. Somewhere Lewis Thomas, in his list of the seven modern wonders of the world says that Wonder Number 1 is a human child, born anywhere in the world. Wonder upon wonder.

What a message for Christmas: The judgment of Scripture can be invalidated by progressive revelation or a new understanding of the ways of God. This land belongs to the Prince of Peace, and no judgment is final. No outsider is left outside forever. Bethlehem has become the city of grace and truth. Christmas is the New Creation (Following John Yoder I capitalize New Creation). And we could use a New Creation.

Bethlehem – birth and burial. Luke Timothy Johnson says that the phrasing in Luke 2, "wrapped him in cloth strips, placed him in a manger, because there was no place" matches the phrasing Luke 23, "wrapped him in linen

cloth, placed him in a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had yet been laid." Birth and death mirror each other. "Christ was born, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Mary and Joseph didn't shuffle off to Bethlehem to sit by a lake and watch the world go by (Thank you, John Fogarty). They were summoned by an emperor who needed more taxes. Somehow it also seems to be about politics, but we only think it's about politics because we trust God too little. The empire deals in taxes and death, but God delivers gifts of life and salvation.

What happened? Mary gave birth to her first-born son. Let Rachel and Ruth rejoice. There was an ancient prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children, because they were not (Jeremiah 31:15), but Rachel weeps no more. She died on the road to Bethlehem, but now Mary now delivered the Christmas that the world had longed for and waited for, the day the world most needed but didn't know it needed. "For **to us** a child is born, **to us** a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder." Upon us a light has shined. Our joy is increased, not just by gifts under a tree but by the gifts of God for the people of God.

Our God was born a homeless infant, but see him wrapped in the arms of Mary, and hear him cry for the first time from a wood-carved manger. Can we see now why the Catholics call her "Mother of God?" Thirty-three years later, he would tell the mothers of Jerusalem, "Weep not for me but for your children" because he saw the insanity of violence grip his people. And then the cry, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" as he died as homeless as the day he was born from a wooden cross. Born in the backyard, killed outside the city, buried in a borrowed tomb. "Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:13). We are all homeless but heaven's around the corner.

"Wrapped in swaddling cloths" – Jesus is the Christmas gift. I can't explain how the magnificence of God was poured into an infant weighing maybe seven pounds: The one who laid the foundation of the earth now lying in a manger; the one who determined the measurements of an ever-expanding universe now a little bitty baby; the one who shut in the sea with doors, made clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band now wrapped in swaddling cloths; the maker of galaxies now held in the arms of a young girl.

If not for some shepherds, watching their flock by night, this event would have passed under the radar of our world of power politics. Shepherds, bottom rung of The Ladder, received heaven's RSVP invitations: "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for **to you** is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Before the shepherds can catch their breath, "There was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among humans with whom he is pleased.'" The angels had been practicing this piece of music for millennia to sing it only this one time. Luke makes it clear that we are the ones who have to learn to sing it for the world to hear. The shepherds scurry off to Bethlehem representing the church. Is Luke telling us that the day is coming when there will be a multitude of the human host praising God? Well, listen to this: "Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God reigns!' "The government shall be upon his shoulders!"

Now, take one last peek at that manger. Mary gently lifts Jesus from the crib, holds him in her arms, and with a trusting smile asks the only question that really matters, "Would you like to hold the baby?"

Let me ask you, "Would you like to hold the baby?" Reach out your arms. Now, open heart and mind and spirit to hold him forever. Ah, now it is Christmas.