

#758 Christmas Preaching in the Wake of Sandy Hook

Colleagues,

Shame on the preacher who attempts this Christmas Eve or Day to dodge the horror of Sandy Hook. She will prove herself a fraud.

On the other hand, woe to the Christmas preacher who tries to address it. He's facing some fiercely hard work at the moment, with no guarantee that what he says will be heard or appreciated. Still, it's got to be done. God's essential response to horror of every kind is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It falls to God's preachers, he and she alike, to put that out there as a genuine response that anchors hope and merits trust. Why does God send us into pulpits if not, like the Bethlehem angel, to "good-news" the stricken with "a mega-joy for all people," said joy replacing a "mega-fear" of the kind that coursed through gun-ridden America like a tsunami this past Friday.

Preachers in America faced a similar challenge 11 years ago. It was the Christmas after 9/11. Minds were still seared with images of the falling towers, or worse, of people plummeting to their deaths from towers burning and about to fall. How was a baby in a manger both good and newsy enough to handle that? I dug into my own files yesterday to recall what I said. Then I passed it along to my partners on the editorial team. One of them urged me to share it with you. So here it is.

Will the rest of you find anything in this old sermon that's of use for your labors this week? By all means draw on it if so. Do any of you have further and/or better insights on this week's good-newsing task that others might profit from, me included?

Get them to us within 24 hours and we'll circulate them.

Meanwhile we invite prayers from all our readers for people whose sorrow today is so woefully deep: stunned and heartbroken parents; children suffering nightmares; a town weeping like Rachel for its little ones. They belong to a nation so paralyzed by wrath and sin, suspicion and fear, that it will not act effectively as other nations have to prevent more horrors like this. May God have mercy. May we who trust him find strength in his Advent promise of all things made new.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2001
Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Park, OH
Text: Luke 2:1-20
Subtext: 2 Cor. 5:20b

See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a Babe with whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to man than a babe.... Who is there whom this sight would not comfort? –Martin Luther

+ In Nomine Jesu +

Let us pray. Come, Holy Spirit, in your great mercy. As we gaze on the baby lying the manger, soak our minds and hearts in the sweet joy of what all this means. Amen.

I begin with words I could not say were it not for Christmas: grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I've been thinking a lot these days about my good friend Joe. Joe was a member of the parish I served in Connecticut, before I

came here. He was a gift from God, somebody who knew and trusted me enough to comment honestly about my preaching from time to time. Joe told me once that he wished I would quit depressing people on Christmas Eve.

Now if Joe were still the Joe I knew, he would not be at all happy, I think, with what I'm about to say to all of you tonight. I'm going to say it anyway. The Word of God quite frankly leaves me no choice.

I understand, I think, what Joe was driving at back then—1993, it was. I remember sympathizing with him at the time, though in a helpless kind of way. I think Joe wanted his Christmas sermons to be like a first-rate Christmas concert—you know, the kind where you sit back and you get to hear wonderful old things wonderfully sung or said all over again, and for just a moment—a sweet, wonderful moment of blessed amnesia—you get to forget how cold, how dark, how painful, how ugly the real world really is.

This is by no means a bad thing, by the way. We all need a break, now and then, from bitter truth. So much of what we Americans do and treasure most at this time of year is expressly designed, I think, to give us exactly that kind of break. Call it Christmas, call it Hanukkah, call it Kwanzaa, call it Ramadan, I suppose. For that matter go with flow and call it simply “the holidays.” It's as if the entire nation comes together to swallow a sort of spiritual Percocet during the waning days of December. We cap it off with a grand national party on New Year's Eve, college football finals to follow on New Year's Day. Then the day after that we all go back to work—those of us who have a job to go to, that is. Those of us who aren't too sick or feeble to work, that is. Those of us, that is, who aren't languishing in prison because we proved to be too evil for all the rest of us to endure, and now we cannot go to work.

Be this as it may: no matter where or how we are, come January 2nd when the pill wears off we are all certain to find that not a whole lot has changed since December 2nd, when the break more or less began.

Come January 2nd the bad boss will still be bossing badly.

Come January 2nd the lousy professor will still be teaching poorly.

Come January 2nd the playground bully will still be pushing weaker kids around.

Come January 2nd the shaky marriage will still be quivering. The troubled child will still be driving its parents to distraction.

On top of all this, come January 2nd there will be Christmas bills for lots of us to start paying. Etc. etc.

Oops.

In my mind's eye I'm seeing Joe—the Joe I knew that is—starting to frown. I'm doing it again, aren't I. I'm breaking the rules of break time. Already I'm talking way too much about the kind of things we're supposed to be taking a break from tonight. Especially tonight. Right?

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Here is what I would say about that to Joe tonight if only he were here so I could say it to him.

First, I'd say "Joe, the people I'm talking to tonight are in fact a whole lot wiser than you and I were in 1993. Oh, there are always wise people sprinkled here and there in every congregation, but something happened in this year of our Lord 2001 that made almost all of us wise. Wiser by far than we ever wanted to be."

All of you know what I'm talking about, don't you.

You simply can't see all those images of September 11 without coming to some kind of new understanding about what we and all the world really need. What we *don't* need is another Percocet kind of Christmas—two weeks of pain relief and nothing more. We all do understand that, don't we? Pain relievers by themselves are fine, except when the patient is dying. What we and all the world require right now is a Christmas cure. How else will people ever stop their hating? Of course nothing ever gets cured—no kind of cure is ever properly promised—unless you've gotten to the root of the disease.

"Isn't that right, Joe." I would say.

And then I would say, "Joe, isn't it so that the lead-in to the Word of God at Christmas has always been depressing?"

Were all the rest of you listening carefully to the account as we heard it read just now?

Do you think all those people flooding the roads of ancient Palestine in the dead of winter were happy to be out there? Do you think they weren't muttering darkly to themselves about that idiotic emperor and his stupid decree?

Do you think the innkeeper was at all pleased when this guy with the hugely pregnant wife came pounding on his door in the middle of the night—as if he couldn't see the no vacancy sign, for crying out loud?

Gentlemen, do you think Joseph was thrilled to bits about listening to his wife deliver her baby in a cow shed? Do you think he wasn't scared to death by her screaming? Do you think he wasn't ashamed to death as a husband, a provider, when those holy screams kept being punctuated by the heehaws of a donkey?

And I would say to Joe, "Do you think, Joe, that your namesake didn't stand there in that stable doing his level best to choke down a big, thick, gagging throatful of anger at God?"

He was, after all, a pious man. We know that. Back home in Nazareth he went to synagogue the way most of us at Messiah go to church, faithfully and regularly. Pious people know they're supposed to love and trust God. They're not supposed to judge him. They're not allowed to be mad at him. Yet how can this good man Joseph help it on this first Christmas night? Isn't God behind all these things that are happening to his beloved Mary? So why hasn't God had the sense and the decency to make better arrangements for her? How dare he allow her to wind up in this stinking stable?

I'll bet Joseph was depressed that night. Depression, say the psychologists, is swallowed anger. If looking squarely at the ugliness of our own reality leaves us depressed, the way it did my good friend Joe, that's because we too are angry at somebody, capital "S", is that not so?

Has anybody here not wondered why God, supposedly in charge of the world, didn't do a better job last September of keeping planes from flying into buildings? How about we start there?

And what might happen, I wonder, if everybody in this room, older than 10, was asked to sit down right now with a piece of paper and start making a list of all those things about yourself, your circumstances, or the world at large that you would change if you were God? How long would it take you to reach a thousand items? How fast can you write?

Go back now, and in your mind's eye start checking the items on your list that are deadly serious: the lost job. Aunt Sally's cancer. The ingrained habit you just can't shake. How about the big broad things, like starving children, or easy abortion, or

global warming? Are not these things the equivalent, for you, of your wife having her baby in a dirty stable? How often have you prayed to God to change and correct them? A thousand thousand times, of course you have. You're a pious, faithful person, like Mary's Joseph. Your parents taught you well. As all the saints have done in all the ages you too have prayed to God, again and again, and still these things you hate so much have yet to go away. No wonder you turn blue when a callous preacher sees fit to bring them up all over again. On Christmas Eve, no less. What time is this to be remembering how mad I really am, deep down, at God.

If Joe—the Joe I knew that is—were here tonight, I'd tell him this. I'd say "Joe, if you want something to be depressed about, consider well what Martin Luther once pointed out, only hardly anyone has ever paid attention. So long as God is only way, way up there where Caesar reigns and far beyond, you and I, the little people down here, will never love him, we will never fear him, we will never ever trust him. We won't be able to. So long as he is only there, and we are here, struggling through the lives he stuck us with in this broken, ugly world, then we will always be somehow angry with him, we will always be calling his judgments into question. Which means that we will always be sinning against him. Which also means that we will always be giving God all the reason he needs, and then some, to be fierce and angry and oh so deadly with all of us in turn.

"So long as he is only there, that is."

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So tell me. Are we starting at last to understand why Jesus was born?

I'm not saying this to Joe, now, by the way. I'm saying it to you.

For all my life I've been surrounded by women, first a mother and four sisters, then a wife and two daughters, to say nothing these days of secretaries and Messiah School teachers. Over the years I've noticed this fascinating phenomenon. Show a woman a baby or the picture of a baby, even, and it's like hitting a button. (Guys, you know what I'm talking about, don't you.) All in an instant they soften, they glow—and they all say “Aaaaw.” Or some such thing. We men and boys crack jokes about this, of course; it's part of our male shtick. But when all is said and done you women have our number. I know you do. We too turn to butter in the presence of a baby.

On the night Jesus was born, a little group of people gathered around his manger bed. Then they looked down, directly into the face of God, and they all said, “Aaaaw.” And for the very first time in their troubled, sinful lives, they found it absolutely impossible to be angry with God. Instead they loved and adored him. At last they could.

This includes, of course, those impious, brutish shepherds who had just been scared to death out there in the fields, where the angel had caught them venting their anger at God under the cover of darkness, the way we all do when we think no one is looking.

What a fantastic present God gave the shepherds that night. Instead of death for the treason they were committing as they carped about his ways, he gave them life, he gave them peace, he gave them joy. He caused them to melt like butter, the way men do. You and I both know that's what they did as they stood there, looking at the sweet and precious face of Jesus, their God and Lord. They were saved that night. For the first time ever in their sorry bitter lives, those shepherds glorified God. Even better, they enjoyed him.

Of course all this would be nothing more than another Percocet,

a fleeting moment of relief in the human story of pain and anger with God were it not for the fact that the baby grew up. Then, as you know, he did two things.

First, he started the work of fixing the world up here at the level where you and I can see it. He healed lepers. He made crippled people walk. He turned greedy rascals like Zacchaeus into first-rate philanthropists.

But second, and far, far better: our Lord Jesus Christ both tackled and finished the work of fixing things for us deep down at the foundation, where the real trouble lies. He forgave our sins. Then he let us pour out our anger and frustration with God on him, which is what we did, when we crucified him. But he also absorbed God's anger with us. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That's what he screamed, as he hung there dying. It was my death he died, and also yours. Therefore his Easter is my Easter. It's your Easter too.

Luther calls this the wondrous sweet swap. The horrible stuff that is ours becomes Christ's. The marvelous stuff that is Christ's becomes ours.

On account of all this another miracle is about to happen right here, in this place, though hardly for the first time. Before the night is out you will have the chance not only to see God, but to hold God, and to put God in your mouth. Here God will be, for you, in the flesh and blood of Jesus, hidden in the form of bread and wine. I hope you will come with haste to see him. And when you hold him there, cradled in your hand, if you don't say "Aaaw," I hope at least you'll say "Amen." If not out loud, then quietly to yourself.

For here is God, the Lord of heaven and earth, making himself entirely helpless and at your disposal, in Jesus, for Jesus' sake.

Or again, here is God, making like a big brother come home for the holidays. He puts his arms around his little sister and he gives her a warm, tight squeeze. "Don't be afraid," says God to us all. "Tonight no one will hurt you. As for tomorrow I will never let you go.

"And as for all those things," says God, "that still need fixing—in your lives, in your world—trust me please to do it in my own good way, in my own good time. Better still, how about you approach them no longer as things to depress you, to make you sullen and angry with me. How about you trust my love for you in Jesus so well that you start instead to tackle them as opportunities to serve as my heart, my mouth, my hands in the world, fixing where and how you can, but always and in everything letting it be known that my love for all people in Christ Jesus is both everlasting and beyond question. You be the one to help them all say Aaaaaw and Amen."

Isn't that what the shepherds did as they headed home to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all things they had heard and seen?

Tonight it's our turn.

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By the way: I would say all these things to my good friend Joe tonight, only I can't. Joe got sick four years ago, or was it five, and then he died. He was barely in his 60's. I know as I stand here that he died in the Lord. This means, of course, that there is nothing I can possibly say on a Christmas Eve that will ever again depress him. To tell the truth, Joe knows far better than I do tonight what the love of God in Jesus is finally all about. In the back of my mind I hear him singing with the angels.

Merry Christmas, Joe. To you, his sisters and brothers in

Christ, a Happy New Year.

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

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