

Christmas Eve Preaching

Colleagues,

This week we're giving you a sermon to read. Here's why.

Many among us preach for a living. This means that one of the vocation's great challenges is presently breathing down our necks. It's the sermon on Christmas Eve, a time when churches, at least in America, are fuller than at any other time save Easter morning. This is the closest that most of us will get to the kind of evangelistic opportunity certain missionaries enjoy as a matter of course. The crowd that evening will be generously sprinkled with folks who rarely come to church, most of them connected in a faint and feeble way to the congregation. They once got baptized, confirmed, or married there; they're still on the rolls getting lots of mail they don't respond to; their grandparents are steady attendees, and showing up to please them on Christmas Eve is part of the drill; etc. The point is, they're there, interleaved in pews or chairs with the steadfast types who are able not only to recite Luke's story by heart but also to spit out five different ways in which the birth of Jesus is excellent news for them, their dear ones, their friends, neighbors and co-workers, their whole wide world for that matter.

Comes the first dilemma. To whom does the preacher pitch the preaching? To the in-crowd or the outliers? Shall she wear the hat of pastor or evangelist? Whose darkness will he probe, the one who bobs back and forth between faith and doubt or the one who doubts as a matter of course and thinks that Santa brings as much or more to the Christmas experience as the swaddled baby does?

My own vote, for what it's worth, falls on the evangelistic side

of this distinction. Let the starving be fed first, and without (thank you) forcing them first to ingest the snide comment or two about how, really, truly, they ought to show up at church more often than they do for the food God gives. That may indeed be the case. Observing it in the circumstances of Christmas Eve is also bound to harden ears and hearts and keep the starved ones skinny. Better by far that they should hear a word so sweet that they'll spill into the night hankering vaguely for more. (Your thoughts on this? Send them in.)

Second dilemma. What does it take by way of diction, image, and content to stir a yen for further hearing? To address this we asked several preachers to send us some past Christmas Eve efforts. They gamely obliged ("Thank you, thank you!"). We turned these over to a small team of lay readers and asked them to pick the one that spoke to them most effectively, where "effective" equals God's good news for us in Christ heard vividly against the backdrop of the bleak Christ-less alternative. All the readers, by the way, are of the steadfast type that makes a habit of listening to preachers and knows the story inside out, so whether their reactions are a good gauge for the kind of food the underfed can swallow is somewhat up in the air. Still, they're closer to a reasonable guess at this than most of us preachers are.

The sermon they settled on was preached in 2006 by the Rev. Dr. Arthur C. Repp, Chris, for short, distinguishing him from a grandfather of the same name and title who went by "Art." Chris is the pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Carbondale, Illinois. He also has a PhD in Russian history with a special focus on the Orthodox Church and spent four years teaching theology and church history in Russian at a Lutheran seminary in St. Petersburg. One of the readers sent along a richly thoughtful comment on what she saw in Chris's work. We'll lead off with it as incentive for you to read yourself. We think it

will also give the preachers among you some clues about things that ears may well be reaching for when you take another stab this Christmas at passing the Promise along.

Let us know, by the way, if you find this helpful-or not. It will help us with plans for future postings like this. Send comments either to me (jburceATattD0Tnet) or to Carol Braun, the person you'll reach if hit the "Reply" button.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editors

Lay Reader's Comment-

The words and images of Luke's Christmas story are deeply familiar to me from years of Christmas Eve services, storybooks, greeting cards, rebroadcasts of the Charlie Brown Christmas special. Chris's sermon takes one familiar line from that story-the host of angels proclaiming "Peace on Earth!"-and he gets into the core of what those words really mean, what kind of peace is really in store for us. He cracks the words open, showing us that the key to the whole story is the need for peace between us and God. The overall effect is not to destroy the familiar emotional resonances of the story but rather to heighten and clarify them, making the words even more meaningful by fitting them clearly into the story of our broken relationship with God and God's marvelous method for fixing that rift. By the end of the sermon, I'm seeing the whole Christmas story with fresh eyes and a full and grateful heart.

Pr. Repp's Sermon-

Christmas Eve 2006

Luke 2:1-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas-everywhere you go. No, really. It's the most wonderful time of the year-the hap- happiest season of all. And I've been dreaming of a white Christmas, but it looks like global warming is taking care of that. In spite of that, though, I hope you'll all have yourself a merry little Christmas now.

I'm guessing that you were hoping for a little more than that when you decided to come out to church tonight for this Christmas Eve service. I'm guessing-and hoping-that you were looking for something different from the continuous, inescapable barrage of generic holiday music in the stores, and on the radio and TV for the past month and a half or more-something a little deeper than Santa hats and frosty snow men, something more meaningful than the Christmas sales at the mall had to offer. I'm guessing that you came out tonight to hear again that timeless story of the birth of Jesus-the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the inn with no room for the expecting mother, the newborn Christchild laid in a manger-the shepherds, the angels, and the announcement from heaven of glad tidings of great joy. There is something that captures our imagination in this story. Something that touches us deep within our souls. A savior is born. God almighty enters our human condition as one of us, a human child. Angels speak a message of peace and simple shepherds become eyewitnesses to history in the making.

The Christmas story from Luke's gospel, as I have observed before, is one that we hear much more on an affective, emotional level than we do on an intellectual level. It is the imagery and the feeling that we respond to. Childbirth. Mother and child. Angels illuminating the darkness and announcing good news.

Advertisers know this, and that is surely one reason at least that the Christmas season is so exploitable and exploited by our merchants. But because we tend to respond viscerally to this story that we know so well, we may miss some of what it is trying to tell us.

One of the things that I think most of us are prone to miss is the message announced by the multitude of angels that join that original angel after the proclamation of Jesus' birth to the shepherds. "Glory to God in the highest heaven," they exclaim, "and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" And the main reason we miss the message here is that it has been so well used-but not for its original purpose. The idea of peace on Earth has a universal appeal that is easily abstracted from the specific details of the Christmas story, and even the immediate context of the angel's message. Who can disagree with its sentiment? Who wouldn't want there to be peace on Earth? That has to be the reason that I saw that message on so many Christmas cards this year when I was looking to buy our cards. And it's a message that resonates even more deeply for us at the present time, when our country seems to be stuck in an intractable war in Iraq, when we face a resurgence of chaos in Afghanistan, and when the decades-old conflict between Israel and its neighbors seems to be farther from a solution than ever. Add to that the genocide in Sudan that is spilling over into the neighboring countries of Chad and the Central African Republic, unrest in the Congo, Sri Lanka, and many other parts of the globe, together with the ongoing fear of terrorism in our own country, and "peace on Earth" would seem to be the one message that our torn and broken world really needs to hear this Christmas season, and in the coming New Year. If only we could stop the fighting and the violence and destruction that breaks out all too often and all too easily. If only, in the now famous words of Rodney King, we could just all get along.

You may be surprised to hear, then, that this is not what the chorus of Christmas angels meant when they proclaimed “peace on earth.” They did not have in mind the cessation of hostilities between warring bands of humans, at least not directly, nor were they endorsing the Pax Romana, the peace that the Roman Empire, the superpower of the day, imposed on its subjects by force and incentives. The peace that the angels announced was rather peace between humans and God.

That will come as a surprise to you especially if you weren’t aware that we were at war with God. But that is exactly how St. Paul describes our relationship to God in his letter to the church in Rome. All of us have sinned. Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men and women, boys and girls. That means that all of us have rebelled against God and God’s good purpose for our lives, choosing instead to go our own way, to serve our own selfish interests at the expense of our fellow humans and the world God created. All of us, says Paul, are God’s enemies.

Only when we understand that fact and take it to heart can we grasp the message of the heavenly host that appeared to the shepherds. The angels were calling a truce between heaven and Earth, and sending out a mediator to sue for peace—a mediator who was the very God, incarnate in human weakness, come to reconcile a rebellious humankind to a merciful God. The traditional Christmas hymn “Hark, the herald Angels sing,” hits the nail on the head. “Peace on Earth and mercy mild: God and sinners reconciled.”

Jesus comes among us as a little child with a mission: to grow into a man and to die on a cross for the sake of the world that God so loves. His death and resurrection accomplish the peace that the angels announced, and his sending of the Holy Spirit enables us to live into that peace by turning from our selfishness back to God, and opening ourselves to our fellow

human beings. And when we take the message of the Christmas angels to heart and live into the peace that God both offers and accomplishes for us, then we can begin to realize the possibility of peace on Earth in the way we originally envisaged it. Because when we are reconciled with God, and only when we are reconciled with God, then we have the resources we need to be reconciled with one another, and peace on Earth in every sense becomes possible.

That's even better news than we first thought. Those are truly glad tidings of great joy. May you hear those tidings as the great good news they are this Christmas Eve. May you take the message of the Christmas angels to heart. And may the peace of God that they proclaimed, the peace that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

Next week & December 22: Fr. Joest Mnemba, "Images of Christ in Africa," a reflection well suited for days of recalling how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

December 29: Jerry Burce, "Justification in Nickel Words," an essay that uses plain language and sharp image to dispel the clouds of abstraction that surround the idea of justification.

January 5: Bishop John Roth, "How to Disagree Well," thoughts on how to approach the ministry of building up the body of Christ, even in the face of divisive issues.