

“The Jesus Vaccine.” A Year-Old Christmas Sermon



Co-missioners,

Last year's Christmas was the bleakest any of us have lived through. The pandemic was raging. Vaccines were not yet. Seniors stayed home. Their dear ones kept a distance for fear of making Grandma sick. A lot of churches were closed on Christmas Eve. Those that dared to be open kept attendees thinly spaced. The music was muted. So was the mood.

Even so, along came preachers with good news to tell. Those who knew their business did their best to direct it toward the miseries of the moment.

Today we send you an example of how this happened at a church in Greater Cleveland. There might be a thought or two here that others would find pertinent for this Christmas too. Circumstances are certainly different than they were last year, but the pandemic hasn't quit. Neither has the plague of sin and dismay that grips us all.

God in Christ has not quit either.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

“The Jesus Vaccine”: A Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2020

by Jerome Burce

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Grace to you and peace on this dark and heavy night—this threadbare Christmas, as it feels to most of us, I should think.

And to some it feels especially thin. You have lost so much in the course of this horrible year, much more by far than others have.



Grace in any case to all of you tonight, and peace as well. So says God, the Father of us all, the One who for all our sakes and with our salvation in mind stuck a needle through the skin of the world some 2000 years ago; and from its tip there fell a drop of antidote.

An utterly wondrous antidote, it was, appearing in the form of a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, as you heard; and tucked away in that little bundle of newborn flesh and blood was the power of God to cure our worst and deepest woes. This baby packed a punch, as we might say. A punch so strong that it's able even now—especially now—to raise the dead, not least the 300,000 Americans, the 1.7 million people worldwide, that covid has killed so far.

God's best and greatest gift to us and to all the world in terrible 2020 is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That's what we're here tonight to remember, to think about, to celebrate—to thank God.

And we're here for another reason too. It's time for a booster shot—another dose, as you might say, of the Jesus vaccine. That's right. The Jesus vaccine—the Word and Promise for us all

of that baby in a manger. The punch it packs is enough not only to raise the dead, but to reshape the living; to turn the likes of you and me into the kind of people God is counting on to push his saving work forward in 2021, blessing the world with the gifts it needs most.

So with that, roll up your sleeves wherever you are, be it here or at home or in some other city far from Cleveland, and let's get going.

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Now as you know, every shot begins with the swab across the shoulder to wipe away the film of surface dirt. The swab for us tonight is a bit of blunt and basic honesty.



So yes, let's say it. Let's spit it out. 2020 has been just awful. We've all been battling misery these many months, though again, some have struggled more than others. I think of the online schooling—how wickedly

glad I've been to be a grandparent in 2020, and not a parent who is trying to cope with this, let alone a student or a student's frazzled teacher. I think of the postponed weddings, the cancelled honeymoons, the family vacations that didn't happen. I think of shuttered restaurants and the people who worked there. I think of other grandpas who couldn't take their grandkids to a baseball game this summer. I think of friends penned up in nursing homes that no one could visit, not even their children, and certainly not their pastors. I think of the extra sad and woeful funerals this year, no hugging allowed. I think of nurses and doctors stretched to their limits like no one else is—and how for them the fear of getting sick that haunts us all is trebled or quadrupled.

Then on top of this came all the extra misery that sinners churn out as a matter of course because that's who we are—not just victims of misery, but makers of misery. So first we suffered through the great toilet paper panic, and after that the great mask fight that hasn't altogether ended yet. And there was tumult in the streets when George Floyd and others were killed. Along came election season—enough said. Through it all we struggled with competing sources of information, a lot of it undependable. The factions in our country grew deeper. Not a day went by without lots of people being loud and angry, fouling the air we breathe with their meanness and contempt, as if the virus in the air wasn't bad enough already. And Christian people did this too. We caved like everybody else to our fears, to our suspicions, to the evil spirits of the day, and for me this is just about the greatest sorrow of them all. I can't imagine that God Almighty was proud of his people this year.

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Now people sunk in misery will clutch at straws to pull them through. I did some of that this year. So did you, I imagine. For sure our neighbors did it, and they're doing it still.

So we said some things like this, perhaps:

We said, this is bad. It could be worse. At least we weren't alive when the Black Death tore through Europe killing one of every three people. At least we weren't around in 1860 when our country split in pieces and Civil War broke out. At least we live in Cleveland where hurricanes can't reach us—another unkind, callous thought, by the way.



Anyway, did it help at all to say such things? I don't suppose.

So again we said, let's focus on what we have in 2020. That miracle of Zoom. That other miracle of Amazon making overnight deliveries. Or the coming miracle of those covid vaccines, so suddenly produced by such smart and gifted people. Or how about that everyday miracle, the one we take for granted. I mean the simple fact that most all of us still go to sleep at night in warm, safe houses with plenty of food to eat.

So did it help this year to remember these things? A little, perhaps; though again not much.

So then we clutched a third time, and we said to ourselves, "Get used to it. This is simply how it is—the new less-happy normal. Stock up on those masks and figure out how to wear them without fogging up your glasses. Let's act like adults."

Good luck with that, God said, as he listened to our thoughts and read what's in our hearts, the way God always does.

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For the record, there was lots of misery in ancient Bethlehem that long ago night we heard about just now. The local inn, as you'll recall, is filled to overflowing, presumably with people who have jostled down the road like Joseph and Mary did. The mood is grumpy. "Some stiff in far-off Rome has decided he wants us all counted, and look what they're putting us through to make this happen. Typical bureaucrats, always pushing us around. If only the food was good. If only the kids weren't sick. I sure hope nobody breaks into our house while we're away."

Out in the fields some shepherds are grumbling too. About the cold. The stinky sheep. The wretched pay. The snooty townspeople. That girl who broke my heart last week. And since Caesar's informers are nowhere near, I hear them muttering dark thoughts about who would pay if they were in charge—this and lots of other stuff that would get them crucified if someone chanced to overhear it.

And of course, as with us, so with those shepherds. It doesn't cross their minds that God is listening in—again, as God always does. God Almighty who, as he listens, absolutely understands that he's the real target of all their grumbling.

God is the one the buck stops with tonight, and that other night too. He knows it. Deep down we know it. I grumbled a lot about God this year, and so did you, though being the pious people we are we worked hard to pretend that we were simply complaining about somebody else. I'll bet those shepherds in that long ago field were a lot more honest than we have been. When you're at the bottom of the human heap the way they are, you have fewer pretensions to live up to. Saturday synagogue is so yesterday for these guys. Anymore they couldn't get in if they wanted to—the good and decent folks would push them away. So when they sit there in the dark rehearsing their misery, they simply spit it out the way Adam once did. "It's *your* fault, God. *You* did

this to us; and if all you did was to sit on your hands instead of stepping up this year when we really, really needed you—still, the fault is yours.”

Ringin' bells, anybody?

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And this, of course, is exactly when the light goes on for those shepherds. And from the light the voice of God's messenger saying the very thing that none of us have any right to hear, nor any reason to expect.

“Fear not,” the angel says. “Don't be afraid.”

And with that he bundles them off to see what God has done for them, for you, for all of us tonight.

“Off you go and get your Jesus shot.” That's my way of translating the angel's instruction for *this* Christmas night.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” I don't know how the angel said this in first century Aramaic, but that's what was ringing in the shepherds' ears as they stood beside the manger, gazing down in that little baby's face.

And as they gazed, they believed what they had heard. Because of this they were able to see what God had done. How the Creator of the universe, the Mightiest of the Mighty, had put himself all the way down to their level, in a place where they—the lowliest of the low, the least deserving—could find him, could get to him. They saw that God was with them in their gloom, their misery. Better still, they saw how God was there, in person, to keep some incredible promises that stretched all the way back to Father Abraham. “Through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed,” God had said. And again he had said through the

prophet Jeremiah, "I will remember their sins no more." And yet again, through Ezekiel, that other prophet: "A new heart I will give you; a new spirit I will put within you."

And that's exactly what God did for those particular shepherds on the first Christmas night. Remember what you heard in the story just now, how they returned to their fields glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen as they stood beside that manger. Gone was the grumbling. Gone was all the ugly accusation, hurled in God's direction. Yes, the night was still cold, the sheep still stank, the pay was still lousy. Yet up from the darkness came fresh new sounds of hope, of joy, of confidence in God. I so hope that someone got to hear it that night. If so, it must have cheered their hearts no end.

Came a time when that baby in a manger went even lower to a cross to finish what he was born to do. He carried our sin on his righteous back and paid the price for our rebellion. He kicked open a door to new and better future for the living as well as for the dead. When Easter happened and Pentecost followed, his apostles would launch the work of filling their world with the same great sounds of hope and joy the shepherds made on Christmas night.

And now it's our turn. Or let me say that better: it's our turn again—especially now, on *this* Christmas night.

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I spoke at the beginning of the Jesus vaccine, the Word and Promise for us all of that baby in the manger, then the man on the cross, and now, on this night, the Lord of heaven and earth.

This is God's medicine for us tonight, and in the coming year as well. It's designed expressly to counteract the virus of our sin—to save us from the peril of raging against God and giving

up on him the way so many others have done and are doing still in these dark and dreadful times.

Remember: not for a moment has God given up on us, however badly we've let him down. The Jesus vaccine is proof of that. And in it lies the power to get us believing this; to make us stronger and more confident in the believing we do. Strong enough to wait on God without grumbling. Strong enough to count on God to come through for us and for the world in God's good time, in God's good way, not forgetting that God's ways are never our ways, and that God's best work is almost always done out of sight and undercover, through people no one bothers to notice—shepherds in a field, for example; that teenaged girl from Nazareth, now stuck for the night in a Bethlehem stable where she just bore God's baby.

And so it will be in 2021. Tonight God sees some families scattered here and there in the locked down homes of Greater Cleveland. They're the ones his heart is set on as he rolls out his plans for the New Year. You're the ones he means to use to rattle next year's darkness with some unexpected sounds of hope and joy.

"A new spirit I will give them," God said. That too is what we get in the Jesus vaccine. The Holy Spirit. The power to see as Jesus sees, to endure as Jesus endured, to trust as Jesus trusted, to forgive as Jesus forgave. In plainer speech, it's the power that fires people up to do good, as we heard in our second reading tonight ([Ti. 2:11-14](#)). This world so needs some people—a lot of people—who are bent on doing good, and who also understand that God sends them into the world day after day to relieve its misery, not to add to it.

God has picked you to be one of these people. Each of you, formed and shaped in Christ Jesus, is one of God's very special

gifts to your little corner of the world this year. Remember that.

Or if you forget—when you catch yourself forgetting—came back again for another wondrous dose of the Jesus vaccine. It's packed with all the promise and power you'll need to get you through these days and to brighten them for someone else.

"You are the light of the world," as Jesus said; and he said it also on the day that each of us was baptized.

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One last quick thought, borrowed from Martin Luther.

Like most people my age I have a scar on my shoulder. Smallpox was still a thing when I was born. People were much more scared of it than they are of covid. So every child got vaccinated. This involved scratching the skin. That's what left the scar.

I also have a hidden scar. It's on my forehead; on yours too. It came with our first essential dose of the Jesus vaccine, the one we got in that baptism I mentioned. It's in the shape of a cross. If you don't see it, God sure does.

This year, you might between yourselves remember that it's there. First thing in the morning is a good time for that. Then off you go to serve the Lord with courage and conviction, with thanks and praise. Off you go, as the blessing to the world—a light shining in the gloom—that God has made you to be in Jesus Christ, your Lord and Savior.

God grant it.



Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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