

Christmas Eve Meditation
 Luke 2:1-20
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Many of you have heard me tell of my friend and mentor, New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, going Christmas shopping with his daughter a few years ago at Lenox Square, a particularly tony mall in Atlanta. The lights, the noise, the press of people – it was all too much. Luke was overwhelmed by the urgent need to escape. “All of a sudden I was struck,” he says, “that there is nothing in this place that anybody really needs; and furthermore, nothing anyone really needs is in this place.” (At the 1998 meeting of the Moveable Feast lectionary consortium, and cited by Robert E. Dunham, *Expecting God’s Surprises*, p. 56).

If you’ve spent time at the mall recently, as I did – yesterday, in fact, pursuing the phantom perfect gift for my husband – if you’ve spent time shopping lately you may well agree with my friend Luke regarding the mall: “There is nothing in this place that anybody really needs ... and nothing anyone really needs is in this place.”

Well by now, dear friends, the malls are closed, and the crush of shopping is over; if you have forgotten anything, it’s too late now. But that doesn’t mean we are done with our searching. And the question for this moment -- perhaps the question for eternity -- is this: what is it we are really looking for? What is it we most truly need? What is it that we hope to find here, and *is* it something that we really need?

Many pastors joke that the congregation’s expectations for tonight are, shall we say, modest. Linda Loving, former associate pastor here, wryly dubbed the late Christmas Eve worshippers – *elsewhere*, of course – the “bourbon and furs” crowd. Others quip that the throngs are here to “put in some spiritual face time” (Earl S. Johnson Jr.’s article, 12/18/06, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, p. 12), just in case someone’s checking who’s naughty and nice. When I was a teenager, stuck in the balcony with my family, I determined that the late night service was designed to provide my father the chance to take a nap. It didn’t help that he snored.

What is it that brings us here tonight? What is it that we’re looking for? For many, the joy of tradition is itself enough. Some have said that the Chancel Guild is taking its life into its hands by not serving communion at 11. But in truth, we pastors – we love the traditions, and we are comforted by the fact that, no matter how bad the parking was, no matter how crowded the pews are, no matter even how lame the sermon, as long as the candles are lit and we sing “Silent Night,” and close with “Joy to the World,” people will go away happy.

Ah, but being Presbyterians, we must have the Word proclaimed, even if in some abbreviated form. So what are we looking for in the message? What is it that we have in mind? The least we can expect to find is something practical – a little like a spiritual toolset, perhaps – some way to connect what happened long ago with how we’re supposed to live today. Indeed, over the years many a Christmas Eve message – including my own -- has offered a well-

wrapped package of historical background tied up with a moral point-for-daily-living. But one of my dear friends in ministry, Karen Sapio, poked fun at all our boiler-plate Christmas exhortations; and though I wince in recognition, I get the point of her parodies, which may be true and may be practical, but reduce the Christmas story to the level of giving your wife a brand new ironing board. How often have we heard (or in my case preached) something like this?

Even though the dates in the gospel don't match up with other historical records regarding the rule of King Herod or Caesar Augustus, historical accuracy was not Luke's concern. Instead, Luke wanted to contrast the reign and power of Caesar with the reign and power of Christ. ... *And so* sisters and brothers, at Christmas we too must decide what kind of power will hold our ultimate loyalty, the power of Caesar or the power of the babe born this night in Bethlehem.

Or this ...

The word "inn" was not like the inns we know today. It was simply a guest room within a household compound. So Mary and Joseph were not turned away by the shuffling innkeeper, but rather were given the stable by relatives who had already given the guestroom to other extended family [in] town for the census. ... *And so* sisters and brothers, at Christmas we too must consider how our own households can make room for our brother Christ, how we will welcome him into our lives which may already feel burdened and over full."

Or this ...

"Shepherds were on the lowest possible rung in Jewish communities in that day. Their constant contact with animals, their inability to observe certain laws while they were out in the field rendered them ritually unclean. How amazing it is, then, that the angels chose these rejected ones to be the first to receive the news of Christ's birth. ... *And so* sisters and brothers, at Christmas we too must remember God's special care for the poor and renew our own commitment to those whom our culture would label outcast or unclean." (Karen Sapio, Pastor at Claremont Presbyterian Church, Claremont, California, on her Christmas Day text prepared for the 2005 Moveable Feast).

Actually, these aren't bad points, if I do say so myself. We do need to decide who is truly sovereign in our lives; and we ought to make room for the Christ in our hearts and in our homes and in the priorities of our wallets and calendars. And we would do well to remember God's compassion for the poor, and God's welcome to the outsiders and unclean. But I must also say this. If all we look for tonight is a bit of history, and a dose of moral exhortation here, then we will still leave somewhat empty ... vaguely dissatisfied, just a bit unfulfilled, even if we cannot quite name why.

What is it, then, that satisfies our longings? What is it that we're really seeking to find this night? Because, in the end, I honestly don't think that most of us are here just out of guilt or duty, or even for the sake of tradition, no matter how right and lovely are the music and the soft glow of the candles. I don't think we're even here only to hear a helpful message, to find a good life-lesson to set us straight.

I think we're here because we're looking – all of us -- for no less than God's presence, Immanuel, God with us, the One to whom all our traditions point, and all the music celebrates. We are here, as one man said, because we're hoping beyond hope that something will happen this time in the depths of our hearts ... We are here because we're longing for some joy to our broken world ... We are here because we are looking to touch God's mystery, to be lifted up from despair, to find a place in God's world, to worship at the source of God's great love for us (if even for just an hour). (paraphrased from Earl S. Johnson Jr.'s article, 12/18/06, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, p. 12).

And this, I truly believe, is exactly what we will find here: that God has prepared such joy for us; for Christ our Savior comes to us, to restore this world gone terribly awry ... to bring comfort to the weary and heavy-laden, and justice to the ill-born

And God has prepared hope for us; for Jesus, our Redeemer, comes not just to reassure us but also to heal us ... to release us from the fears that bind us, and loose the yoke of the sins that control us.

And God has offered mystery to us, the mystery of Word made flesh ... the mystery of God's outrageous love for us that condescends to make its home on earth.

Isn't this what we really come to find here: The Word made flesh, God's Word that breathes its new life in us, even now, that draws us closer to being the glorious image of God that we were, all along, intended to be. This, I think, is what we come to find here. And it is beautiful.

Many centuries ago, St. Augustine once wrote, "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee," and so it is that we search and we search until we find our heart's desire, until we find our heart's true home.

The malls are quiet now; their doors are closed, and the crush of shopping is over. In the end, there was nothing there that any of us really needed; and nothing that we really needed was there. And everything – everything – we really need is found here, at the manger; here, at the hearth of the Lord our God, on this most holy night. Amen.