

Sermon for Christmas Eve

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Merry Christmas, y'all! Whether you've come from far afield or just up the road, we're glad you're here. It always takes me a while to get Christmas down in my bones, but there's something about this year that's been extra tough. Oh, who am I kidding, there's no need to dance around this stuff, y'all know it as well as anybody. If ever there was a moment in my lifetime when the miracle of Christmas was needed, it's now. But here's the thing: what Christmas has come to mean makes that sentiment sound, I don't know, insufficient? If the only thing we know about Christmas is what we're sold, the Christmas miracle doesn't seem all that miraculous. When we're sold a miracle, it amounts to little more than a cash grab. Presents, and not just any presents but the hot, new, this-year-only kinda presents; cards, gift cards, seasonal, annual, family update cards; trees to keep inside; delicate things to hang on trees kept inside; chasing your cats away from delicate things hung on trees kept inside; you get the idea. The way most of us experience it, Christmas is a complicated, joyful, fraught, grief-filled, joy-filled, quiet, loud, chaotic, beloved, and somewhat dreaded interruption in the early days of winter with lots to look forward to and lots to worry about. And however it hits ya, it always takes an extra day or two to recover from, and by the end of it all, you long to get back to your regular routine and your own bed and your own space. The miracle in that kind of Christmas is that we keep doing it!

As much as those trappings of Christmas dominate the holiday, they're just things that've kinda glommed onto this cold night and the days around it. To borrow a stale phrase, the real reason for the season is Jesus. I know, stick with me. It sounds cheesy, and it kinda is, I suppose, especially if we mean the reason for the season is the saccharine scene unfolding in the manger. We know that story so well, the wonder's worn thin. But that's what a Christmas Eve sermon's supposed to be about. This should be a feel-good thing so we can all go home and feast on roast beast and go back to our regular lives unchanged and unchallenged. This should come as no surprise by now, but I can't do that in good conscience, not this year. And if I've not challenged you before this year, I probably wasn't doing my job. See, the reason for the season isn't just to shine some "feel good" into these long nights. The reason for the season is Jesus. Yes, there's all the things he is and all the things he'll become. There's the miracles, the preaching, the cross. Redemption and forgiveness and world altering love. Yeah, those things matter, and they're part of what we're up to.

But that's not the reason for the season that's got me jazzed right now. See, there's a side of Jesus that seems to get talked about a lot more by people outside of Christianity than inside: his unfailing fight for justice. That's the reason for the season. Jesus is the child of a shotgun wedding, the apparent son of a couple of seemingly inconsequential nobodies, born in a barn of all places and such a backwater hillbilly that people disregard his preaching 'cause they think nothing good can come out of backwater towns. That's Jesus, and as our story tells it, at least, that's our guy -- not a prince, a duke, or a profiteer. Far as anyone knew then, he was just a guy, but he showed us that "just a guy" can shake an empire. In just a few days time, that baby and his family will become refugees fleeing for their lives. They'll only return when it's safe, and he'll grow up with calloused hands and back sore from hard labor. He'll teach from that place of labor with an intimate knowledge of fishing, fields, plows, money just barely scraped together, food running out. Jesus comes to be who he is in an unjust world where power, influence, wealth, and social status're distributed with massive inequality. He'll flip tables when sacredness is replaced by commerce. By the way, I'm sure many of y'all've heard that story about Jesus flipping tables, but do you remember the little pause in the middle of it where he stops, considers the offense, then sits down and hand-braids a whip to clear out the offenders with? Do you know how long it takes to hand-braid a whip? Me neither! But it can't be quick! He stewed, he wasn't overcome by an outburst of

passion; he took his sweet time and planned, braided, stewed some more, braided some more, and *then* flipped and chased.

Which is to say, the reason for the season is a reason we desperately need right now. I'm not telling y'all to go out and braid your whips, but I am telling you that what Jesus took issue with is far larger than the hot-button distractions that are, at best, tertiary to the point of Christianity. Jesus comes into this world tonight to save souls, sure, but that isn't limited to quiet promises made in secret. That soul saving starts with humanity's basic needs. The reason for the season being centered on Jesus means our roast beast feasts are great, but really we oughta be feeding folks stuck outside, even inviting them in to dine with us. It means the economic inequalities that squash everyday people must be overturned. It means the impossible choices so many face between, say, paying rent or buying groceries, shouldn't be choices at all. Look at what Jesus will go on to do. He'll heal indiscriminately. He'll feed people, dine with the dregs of society. He'll break the rules if it means serving another person. He'll disarm his own followers rather than lead an armed rebellion. He'll win over the stubborn with compassion and kindness, he'll elevate workers in place of overseers, he'll condemn the wealthy, he'll place the fate of the world in the hands of the poor. As I've said so many times this year, if it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us.

Y'all, it may be uncomfortable to hear, but Christianity demands we put the needs of all other people before our own. There are parts of our world where that's abundantly obvious, but these days, that kind of selfless sacrificial service is the sort of thing that'd get you tossed out of far too many board rooms and halls of power. And the truth of this season is that its reason has been co-opted by those who would rather we coo over the cuteness of Santa kneeling at the manger than to follow the actual instruction of who that baby will become. To put a finer point on it this beautiful evening, there's an old way of helping folks suss out what kind of people to listen to: "You will know them by their fruits." It's not always the fastest method, but still, pay attention. People can say, I can say whatever I like, especially whatever paints me in a good light. You will know the depth of my sincerity by the fruits of my labor, my preaching, my work here. The same is true of anyone. Jesus would go out of his way to visit the highly contagious sick. He would do anything in his power to save those who came to him for help. He'd heal. He'd feed. He'd welcome foreigners. He'd sit with a beggar before he'd sit with a king. If it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us.

When you leave this place tonight, take that Jesus with you. Remember that little baby, of course, but remember also why so many people in power were afraid of him before he could even walk. They knew his fruits long before he could speak, and they were terrified of the reckoning he represented. And as you leave this place, as you sit around the table, admire the tree, chase the cat away from yet another ornament, pay attention. Listen for who people serve, regardless of who it is they say they serve. Watch for the fruits of their actions. And weigh them against the life of justice modeled so thoroughly by Christ. That's the reason for the season. It will make you uncomfortable. Good. It will challenge your loyalties. Good. It will shake the foundations of nearly every one of our systems. Good. You see, silent nights aren't always known for putting us at ease. Sometimes they trouble our souls and confront us with desperately needed changes. Sometimes they confront us with our own errors like so many ghosts past, present, and future. And sometimes we need those silent and awful nights to get back to where we should be. That may sound like a downer, but I promise you, that unflinching silent encounter with our selves can bring all the joy and peace this season is so known for, only this joy and peace is real and sustaining. You wanna know the reason for the season? Find you another horrifying headline, and you will see the reason, you will see the Christ you're meant to serve. In case that's too ambiguous, here's a little hint: Jesus ain't the one handcuffing others; he's the innocent one carried away under false charges to disastrous effect. As we sing tonight, as this silent night works on us, remember him, remember those like him, and consider where it is you stand.

Perhaps the greatest gift tonight points us to is that no matter what you are or who you've harmed, you always have the capacity to change, to fix what you broke, and to turn your errors into service of those you've harmed. That doesn't mean you're free from consequences. It means we welcome you to do better. We welcome everyone to do better. And we'll know we've done better enough to get it right when the fruits we're known by line up with the fruits that little child'll come to embody. That's the reason for the season, y'all. Not presents, though they're nice. Not cookies left out for Santa, though I've been told those're pretty tasty. Not even the lovely faces of all y'all gathered here tonight, though y'all are lovely. The reason for the season? That little baby will shatter the injustices that make our current world a gift only for the manipulative few. Christmas turns our priorities outward, and we get the fruits of Christianity right only when we follow that outwardly focused service of Christ. Seek justice. Do mercy. And walk humbly with *that* God. The world, our nation, our souls will be the better for it.