

Christmas Eve

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Merry Christmas! We made it! Y'all, I don't wanna go and make this about me, but I just need to take a second and look around. I didn't get this last year. I know y'all celebrated, but I have no idea what it looked like. So, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to savor this. Ah. Look at all y'all. Merry Christmas.

We've been on a long road here. This year, Advent took on a heavier tone than we're accustomed to. Some years, these past four weeks leading up to tonight, some years this anticipation feels like race horses gathering in their slots before the starting gate drops. Everything and everyone's champing at the bit, raring to go, shuffling into chutes, and then there's this tiny pause before the gates snap open and we're off. There's a clear finish line come Christmas, we just gotta get there, and boy isn't it fun to just race all the way to it! Yeah, that wasn't this year. The calendar swung around like it always does, and mostly, we all looked at those gates and wondered if we really had to do it this time. The track ahead looked a little less fun and a little more like an obligation, furlongs stretching ahead that we've gotta cover because, hey, we're here and this is what we do. Boy, do I get it. Sometime around Thanksgiving, I was grateful to have another shot at Christmas up ahead, but dear Lord, did I know it was going to be a lot of work to get there. And with daily naps and weirdly early bedtimes, I wasn't sure I could do it. I thought that was just me. But over and over again, I saw that same feeling in your eyes. Yay. Christmas.

I don't know if we're weary or wounded or afraid of what today'll bring. I don't know if it's the daily covid q-tips up our nostrils or slapping masks on again or headlines trickling back in with news of flair ups in far flung and too-close places. Or maybe we're just plain tired. And maybe it's all of that and more. These past few weeks, we've talked quite a bit about loss and the sorrow it brings and the longing for time to process everything that our lives and our world have become. We've talked about grief and the way it doesn't play fair. And we've talked about grief and the way it compounds. And we've talked about grief and the way it piles up and just keeps hammering us right as we're about to find our feet again. We've talked about grief a lot. Merry Christmas, by the way.

It's a tough year for it, been a tough several years for it, but there's something about this one that feels harder. Maybe it's 'cause we're emerging enough to poke our heads up and actually take stock of what we've been living through. We're exhausted by what we see, and we're haunted by what we don't, and we kinda miss the days of hiding inside and never having to put on real pants, and we really want to be around people, but we don't really like people anymore, and we have a hard time finding faith in our leaders and in other people and, I don't know about y'all, but my understanding of just about everything has been shaken so hard that I'm not even sure if I trust gravity to show up tomorrow. So no wonder everything feels weird this year.

I know when I was laid up all those months I hated not being able to do much of anything, but also, there was a part of me that knew I needed it. And I don't just mean my body needed it, which it did. I mean, my soul needed it. I needed to lay around and read and let the world happen out there and know that someone else was taking care of things, making space for me to get well enough to step back in, but also making space for me to not have to feel any pressure to hurry this along. Part of me wishes I could give all y'all the same thing, a moment to lay around, to let the world whirl by, to read or binge a million shows or let your mind turn off while we take care of everything that's got you spinning. That's what sabbaths are about, setting aside the world for a minute, not because we don't care about it but because it hurts so much to do all that we need to do out in it. Our church lately has shifted around a little bit. We've done a whole lot out in the world, but lately, we've come back inside and leaned on this warm place to worry. By the way, if you're around and you need it, those doors are open all hours of the day, and we'll even leave a light on for ya. This place is set aside for just that, and

speaking as someone who has stained a few of those cushions with my own tears, don't you dare feel ashamed of whatever it is you feel when you walk in this place. Be it fear or sorrow or worry or disdain or joy or skepticism or doubt or anger or love or nothing at all, I promise you, generations of people have sat in those same pews before you with all that in mind, too. On fact, some of what they carried's carved in the back of the pew in front of you. Whatever it is, it's safe here, and it is welcome here, and it is wanted here.

You know, the one thing I've had a hard time with this year, no that's not even remotely close to right. Let me try that again. *One* of the things I've had a hard time this with this year -- yeah, that's more like it -- one of the things I've had a hard time with this year is one of the big hallmarks of the Christmas Season, and I gotta admit, I'm a little nervous talking about this from the pulpit. I'm having a hard time with hope. And that's not great, not for a preacher, and as it turns out, it's not all that great for anyone else, either. Hope gives meaning to all that stuff we try to do now. Hope gives meaning to the things that weigh heavy. Hope even gives meaning to the breaks we take and the sabbaths we worry from. And a hope-less Christmas isn't just a terrible feeling, it's wide of the mark of the point of the season. Because, at least the way the story goes, the point of the season is that that little baby child, born in a manger, turned away from the inn, visited by shepherds and angels and weird-gift givers, that little baby child holds the salvation of the entire world, and in his precious little heart rests our hope. But have you seen the world? It's hard, dang hard to look at **everything** and tell myself that **that** is what God intended. I think my problem is that I've gone and let the pop-Christianity version of the story win out and forgotten what tonight's really about. Tonight is not a happily-ever-after story. Tonight is not Santa kneeling by the manger with fluffy red hat in hand. Tonight drops us down in the middle of a long conversation between God and God's people.

Ya see, Christmas doesn't come out of nowhere. For as long as people have been around, we've decided to act a certain way to honor God. We say we're going to do things different this time, and we shake on it, and then as soon as we set foot near a particularly scrumptious fruit tree, we break our promise. And then we make a new promise, say we're going to do things different this time, shake on it, and then raise a stone behind our brother's back. And then we make a new promise, say we're really going to do things different this time, shake on it, and inevitably step falsely again. I'm not trying to say human history is all woe and sin. I'm just saying that on the whole as a species, we're real good at saying we'll do the right thing and real bad at doing the right thing. So that baby in the manger is yet another in the long line of promises to do things different this time. But within a few short days, he and his family'll become refugees, and he'll grow to create miracles and inspire peace and love and hope, and the people shake on it, and then raise a cross for him to bear. Tonight is not about hope, not in the saccharine sense. Tonight's still about hope, it's just a little more real than the commercialized side of the holiday would have us realize. Tonight is about hope not because everything is great now, but because deep down, we know the world isn't what it should be, and we long for it to get better. And it will, or so we hope.

I know, maybe this isn't the right tone for our chipper holiday. If you came here tonight expecting a sweet appetizer of a message before the family dinner, I apologize. I can't give you that, it wouldn't be honest. What I can give you, though, is truth. And that truth is that the Christian story is nuts. How dare we hope? Who in their right mind would look at this morning's covid test and hope? Why in God's name would you read about the impending climate disaster and hope? What about any part of our political arena could inspire hope? Look around. When and where could we ever have a reason to hope again? This world tells us there is no place for that hope. (Or if there is, it's some false hope guar-an-teeed to cure what ails ya, or fix it all if you just vote right or buy right or consume right. And really, if you look at it just right and squint, maybe the world's actually great and the problem's you, ya ever think of that? You just can't see it 'cause something's wrong with you, and if you just use this one thing that I just so happen to have up for sale, well then, we'll have you back in no time.)

Y'all. The problem isn't you. The problem is the world ain't what it should be and we're suddenly and painfully aware. The scales have fallen from our collective eyes, and we are shocked by what we see. And the crazy thing, the crazy thing about tonight, is that in spite of all that, we came here anyway. Buried under all the noise and the worry and the endless weight of things we carry, some truth still rings out when that child enters the world. Just like us, his story starts in a manger with massively unreasonable hope. His story starts there, but it doesn't end with the cross. That story carries on. Now I know this kinda talk is gonna make some of you itchy, and that's ok, but I gotta land this sermon somehow. It's our story, itches and all. That story of Christ's doesn't end with his shameful death on the cross. That story carries on when hope defeats even the darkness of the grave. And that story carries on as a woman tells her friends the glory of an empty tomb. And that story carries on as those friends rush to find hope in that emptiness, no body, no grave, no permanence of loss. And that story carries on as one person tells another and another and some of 'em think to write it all down. And that story carries on as the Body of Christ gathers with each new person, each new family, each new church, and on and on and down through time across pain and mistakes and generations and loves all the way through this most recent global disaster. And that story carries on all the way down to this very moment on this very night in these very pews. And here it lands, a star above pulling us here, in spite of every reason not to be here, and my God are there reasons not to be here, that star pulls us all here, quiet and peaceful and longing for the world to be different and despairing that it isn't and glad to be with family, even if the pew isn't as full as it has been, even if there's one less table setting waiting at home, even if there's just no reason to be happy about it this year, that star still pulls us here.

And maybe, though there's no reason for it, maybe still, we hope.