

Sermon for Christmas Eve

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Merry Christmas! Wow, it's good to see all y'all! What a delight. I love Christmas. In spite of all it takes to get here, I love it. Even back when I hated going to church and just went along to make my mom happy, I couldn't help myself. The music, the wreaths, the eggnog. It's just beautiful, and it comes right when we need a little extra beauty the most. The world's dark, the nights are cold, and roast beast is a rare treat.

I don't know if this is familiar to y'all, but the way I grew up, there was so much pressure around Christmas. Like, it had to be perfect. Or if it wasn't, it had to be imperfect in all the right ways. The cooking schedule required a team of spreadsheet planners so everything'd hit the table at the same time. Ornaments had to be organized carefully around the tree so as to look like they just happened to get up there all on their own in exactly the right places. And in the room we were only allowed in on special occasions, us kids had to set the table with measuring sticks and an iron for the napkins. By the time we left the house for church, we hadn't stopped making everything perfect for three days. Of course, it never was perfect. Something always went weird. One year the power went off for two whole weeks so we opened presents by candlelight. Another, mom insisted on trying to make Yorkshire pudding, but what emerged from the oven was less holiday treat and more eldritch horror. Another, while the rest of Christendom celebrated the birth of Christ, we mourned a heap of losses and, try as we might, we just couldn't catch the Christmas spirit.

But the church was there, weirdly quiet and raucous all at once. It looked like it did every Christmas. It smelled like it did every Christmas. I wore the same sweater I wore every Christmas. It didn't matter that the cuffs kept creeping up my forearms a little farther each year; that was my Christmas sweater. So the church was there, and once we filled a pew to bursting and shed our coats, for the first time in days, I could breathe. I'm not saying church was exactly relaxing for a restless kid like me, but it was a break. I didn't have to make anything perfect there. I didn't have to make anything at all. I just got to sit and listen and maybe do some pew aerobics. And for my troubles, a priest gave me a weirdly comforting stale cracker. By the way, there's an old joke about those communion wafers. It's easier to convince people those wafers are the Body of Christ than it is to convince 'em they're bread. Anyway, Christmas was a whole lot of things all wrapped into one, and in spite of the pressure and the grief and the unreasonable expectations, somehow I still remember Christmas fondly. I mean, I guess that's kind of obvious given where I stand now.

We live in a rough world, and when it comes down to it, while I've lived my own hardships, there is a darkness that's truly unfathomable to someone like me. I can only empathize from a place of experience so far. And beyond that, the world gets darker still. Stories from Ukraine and Palestine and countless other places we think we can get away with forgetting about reveal a side of humanity Hamilton simply does not see. And in some ways, I suppose that's just fine. If I had my druthers, there wouldn't be a soul in this world afraid of what crashes through life from above or what terrors the night will bring. I wish I had a wand to wave and cast all that aside. But I don't. And God's not my personal magic trick. So tonight, in far-flung places, prayers emerge from fearful hearts and mangers perch atop piles of rubble while war closes Bethlehem's churches.

I think it's easy for us to miss the original meaning of Christmas. I know, that's a thing preachers say all the time. But I'm not talking about cashing in on the secularization of the holiday. I'm talking about what this night meant the first time around. We've sanitized it, made it accessible, even saccharine. And in doing so, the revolution that begins away in a manger becomes just a break from school and an excuse to go see family. There's nothing wrong with a little rest and some quality time, but it's a real shame we gave up a new world in exchange for midwinter mollification. So, in case you've forgotten, here's what that first silent night was about.

Nine months ago, a young woman was told the impossible. She'd have a child without going through the normal steps, and that impossible child would do impossible things. We ask "Mary, did you know?" but the story makes it abundantly clear. She knew, and it seems she knew then more than we know now. She sings her gratitude but she doesn't leave it there. In that song, Mary has a whole lot more to say than just "thanks for the kid." She says what exactly that kid's gonna get up to, and spoiler alert, it's not just loaves and fishes. He'll raise up the lowest in society. He'll show strength in mercy. He'll overturn unjust systems of oppression, scatter those that benefit from them, feed the hungry, upset the rich, empower the meek.

Mary then travels to see her cousin, another woman impossibly carrying a son, and when they meet, their growing bellies touch as they share a sacred embrace. By the way, neither of the men that go with these women speak. One just doesn't speak, the other cannot speak. In a world that men dominated, when it was time to pave the way for Christ, it was the mothers' who reigned first. And when her cousin's husband finally can speak again, what does he say? This child will overthrow empires and bring about the promise of the prophets. In case you need a refresher on what those prophets promised, it's a societal leveling that would make politicians across the spectrum squirm. There's one prophet that went so far as to say the poor will inhabit the spare houses of the rich, and the wealthy that get in the way of justice will be ground to dust. Y'all, mollification is the last thing on their minds.

A quick sidebar: there are some who say the whole story can't be believed because of the focus on Mary's virginity. I'll say this: one of the most important things our scripture emphasizes over and over again is that, when God chooses people to do extraordinary things, God chooses the lowest on the societal ladder. God chooses prostitutes, last-born sons, thieves, and maybe the worst of 'em all, tax collectors. So when God chooses Mary, the story's side of it is that God takes a child with no standing and then she carries the fate of the world inside her. Great. But even if it did happen differently, if she came to be pregnant any number of other ways, the story still holds. A fatherless son of an unwed mother was about as low as it got, and that's who God chose. Because of course that's who God would choose. No matter how you slice it, that unassuming baby enters the world with a ton of expectations laid at his feet. He'll be named King of Kings, a title reserved for the emperor, by the way. He'll be hunted and become a refugee only days after his birth. He'll draw kings from distant lands who bend the knee. And all this before he can even crawl.

You see, the promise of Christmas is not pine trees and presents, much as I do love the trappings of the season. The promise of Christmas is that while we know this world is broken, beginning tonight, we're reminded of our hope: that it can change. And that change brings total revolution. If we live into that promise, unjust structures don't stand a chance. Evil rulers will be toppled. Targeted oppression will be revealed for the thinly veiled hatred it is. For the record, I'm not telling y'all to go off and storm any government buildings here. But with this revolution, the wealthy won't have too much, and the poor finally'll have enough. That's what that little baby in the manger's all about. That's what tonight is all about.

Now, I'm guessing there's a thought dancing like sugar plums in some of your heads. If that's what Jesus' birth was about, why do harmful systems still exist? The short answer is, I don't know. I don't know why some of his ideas took but not these. I suspect it's because they're scary. Revolution is terrifying, especially for those in power, those with the most to lose. And while even just the hope of revolution gives life to those that need it most, it's nearly impossible to imagine a totally clean slate with equality, respect, and dignity at the root. I don't know, maybe it's just easier to focus on the sweetness of this night. But we cannot ignore it. Christmas is a revolution. It was back then. And it remains a revolution now. This world needs to change. We know the stories, we know what Christianity has become. We know what we look like at our best, and unfortunately, we know what we look like at our worst. Christmas is a revolution that promises a world where everyone,

absolutely everyone, lives in peace and comfort. Christmas is a revolution that brings us face-to-face with structures designed to grind the poor into profit and insists this is not the way. Christmas is a revolution with love as its materiel. What gives me hope is that we actually set this day aside, and the whole 12 days to come, we set this day aside to celebrate the beginning of that revolution. Yes, the baby's cute. Yes, the songs are sweet. Yes, family and gifts and traditions are lovely. But beneath 'em all, revolution rumbles.

Saint Teresa of Ávila has this beautiful line where she says, "Christ has no body now but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which He looks Compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, Yours are the eyes, you are His body. Christ has no body now but yours." If Christmas is going to revolutionize our world, if the world is to be made right, it needs your body, your hands, your feet. Every year, we do this. We make some progress, we lose a step, but every Christmas we renew the revolution. This year is the year. And if we don't succeed, we'll try again. And again. And again.

It's tempting for me to remember those childhood Christmases and fall into the cozy old habits of the season. And that's just fine, but that can't be where we stay. Love grows from those places as much as anywhere else, and love is contagious. A revolution of love ought to set the world aflame, and tonight the match gets struck. That's the true meaning of Christmas. That's the challenge before us. That's the story we should be telling, and that's the story that guides our days. Tonight Jesus is born, and tonight we celebrate. But tomorrow, our hands, our feet, our bodies have a revolution to start. That revolution begins with love. That revolution begins with Jesus. That revolution begins now. And so, I wish you all a Merry, world-changing Christmas.