

Christmas Eve, Year C  
December 24, 2018  
New Song Church  
Jane Stewart

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

## **Swaddled**

Bishop Steven Charleston uses a marvelous image to describe our celebration of Christmas. He says, “Like the swaddling cloths in which the newborn Jesus was wrapped, Christmas, for many of us, is like streamers of warm and wonderful family memories, of images that we treasure and hold dear, that we wrap around ourselves every Christmas. It keeps us warm in the winter. It makes us feel comforted and hopeful. It brings us back to childhood - every Christmas, year after year after year.”

Think about that. Are there memories that swaddle you this night? . . . .

Whatever they are, here we are, worshipping together on this Christmas Eve, each wrapped in our own sets of memories.

The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, certainly experienced this “Christmas Effect” that Charleston describes. From his cell in Tegel military prison in Berlin, he wrote to his parents on the first Sunday of Advent, 1943: “I don’t have to tell you how greatly I long for freedom, and for all of you. But for decades you gave us such incomparably beautiful Christmases that my grateful memory of them is strong enough to outshine even this rather dark one. It is times like these that show what it really means to have a past and an inner legacy independent of the change of times and conditions. The awareness of being borne up by a spiritual tradition that lasts for decades gives one a strong sense of security in the face of all transitory distress . . . .”

At the writing of his Advent letter, Bonhoeffer's circumstances were dark indeed. His "transitory distress" would continue to increase through the remaining 16 months of his life and would end at Flossenburg concentration camp at the end of a hangman's noose as punishment for his resistance to the Nazi regime.

Bonhoeffer was fortunate to have that store of positive memories of Christmases past to sustain him through the difficult times. As we know, and as you may know from your own experience, not all of us have that happy reserve on which to draw. For some, Christmas is the time of year when everyone else seems happy while they struggle to put a smile on their face so as not to spoil other people's good cheer. Christmas may be a trigger of sorts, bringing to light feelings of loneliness, disappointment, rejection, or grief. For these, the swaddling bands may feel more like a boa constrictor, trying to squeeze the life out of them, rather than the cozy, comforting embrace that others experience.

Bonhoeffer continues in his letter to his parents, "From the Christian point of view, spending Christmas in a prison doesn't pose any special problem. Most likely, a more meaningful and authentic Christmas is celebrated here by many people than in places where only the name of the feast remains. Misery, pain, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt have an altogether different meaning in God's eyes than in the judgment of men. God turns to the very places from which humans tend to turn away."<sup>i</sup>

"God turns to the places from which humans tend to turn away." Isn't that, rather than our personal memories or feelings, the central truth of this holy night? The fact that Jesus is born to an unwed teenage mother from Nazareth, is born in a stable

rather than the inn, and that angels announce his birth to shepherds, rather than to Bethlehem's aristocracy, these elements of the story of that first Christmas tell us that God welcomes people and welcomes circumstances that seem to us to be far from desirable. In fact, it seems that God prefers the company of those whose lives are lived on the fringes of society – refugees, prisoners, the poor, the homeless, the lost, the last, the least. Those for whom Christmas is not all warm and fuzzy, happy, happy, joy, joy. God is not afraid to get down into the very real mud and muck of human life where pain, fear, grief, anger, deprivation, and loneliness are found. God comes to us, even, or perhaps especially, in times of loss, distress, and uncertainty. Of course, God loves all of us, but especially wants those who don't feel loved or lovable to hear the good news that every person, yes, you too, are loved. Your life matters to God. Beloved of God, hear the good news of great joy to you and to all people. Jesus is born! And God's gift, given that first Christmas, means that God loves, embraces, and celebrates you, not in spite of who you are, but because of who you are! The angels didn't tell the shepherds to run and take a bath to make themselves presentable before showing up at the manger. They were invited to come just as they were. We too, are invited to come just as we are, dirt, struggles, and all.

Christmas Eve is a night we greet with the praises of the angels, the wonder of the frightened shepherds, and the awe of an exhausted young mother cuddling her newborn child in her arms. The birth of the Christ child is the culmination of all our longing; the source of our hope; light infused into the darkness of our world and of our individual lives. For this night we celebrate the gift of God's love given to us, for us, for all the world, in the birth of a child – God's child.

Whatever hopes and fears we hold this night – whether we are feeling joyful or despondent, fearful or certain, loved or lonely, the good news of Christmas is that whatever the condition of our hearts, that is the very place where God meets us,

where God holds us close, swaddles us in bands of infinite love, and whispers the words we long to hear – I am with you, always – always and forever, no matter what.

Tomorrow, next week, next year, there is work for us to do. But for tonight, this Christmas Eve, swaddled in those bands of love, bathed in the glow of the light of Christ, our hearts overflowing with awe and wonder at the gift God has given us in Jesus, let us simply sink into the arms of love, and delight in the goodness of our God.

Let us pray.

God of glory,  
your splendor shines from a manger in Bethlehem,  
where the Light of the world is humbly born  
into the darkness of human night.

Open our eyes to Christ's presence in the shadows of our world,  
so that we, like him, may become beacons of your justice,  
and defenders of all for whom there is no room. Amen.<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The Mystery of Holy Night, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 3.

<sup>ii</sup> Revised Common Lectionary Prayers, p. 38.