

“Times of Yearning”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

**Christmas Sunday, 90th Anniversary of the Church,
December 25, 2011**

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Holy Scriptures: Luke 2: 1-20

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to

you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sermon

Times of Yearning

Before we hear the Word proclaimed,

listen first to a word on the Word for Christmas Day.

On this morning when the music is well-known

and the nativity story even more so,

when we hear what we already know,

we feel a part of the Word.

On Christmas morning, as Fred Craddock said,

“There is nothing here for the common scold.”

Rather than think we might be told by the preacher what we ought to do,

how we should behave,

or what one must do to “get right with Jesus”,

we are relaxed, at home, secure,

enjoying a collective sense of
empowerment

because Jesus’ birth story is
our story.

The music is familiar.

Oh, I know this carol!

The scriptures have worn a gentle groove in our minds and memories.

Yes, that’s what the angels said to the shepherds.

Oh, my, that Herod sure was tricky;

remember how the three kings outfoxed him!

We are hearing, feeling, sensing, celebrating what we already know.

This is our story,

and we claim the story as ours because God gave it to us
the same exact moment God gave us Jesus.

God With Us, Immanuel.

“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us full of grace and truth,”

and the Word is our story.

On this morning the sermon is our sermon;

the proclamation our Good News, gifted to us from the divine,
the Word of God might as well be proclaimed from all
our lips,

for it comes from deep, deep within our souls

and bursts forth with singing and
praise.

This is our story, our sermon, our Word,

lifting us up from our common ground

and taking us to new heights and new places,

preparing us to encounter the holy in unlikely
spaces

and to meet new faces.

Here, now, on this holy of holy days,

we share in a delightful sense of enjoyment and happiness,

giving way to feelings of relief and release.

So relax, sit back and enjoy the ride.

Hear what you already know;

let's rediscover together

when and where and why and who and how

God takes us, shakes us, breaks us, and
remakes us.

Times of Yearning

Winter of 1921

23 people from the City of Decatur, Georgia

gathered in the Shealy home on Christmas Day.

God had given to them a purpose and a vision.

They had a yearning, a hunger, an ache to live out the gospel in their
community.

Many had been taking the trolley from Decatur to Atlanta to worship
God there.

But there was not here.

No, the yearning was to serve God in the here and now.

They gathered on December 25th

to charter and build a Christian Church in the city.

They prayed; read from the Bible; discussed their plans; shared their
hopes.

Taking pen in hand,

they signed their names to a legal and theological document,

blending secular and sacred,

to charter a new course and a new church of
Jesus Christ.

Did they know what was going to happen in the future?

Should they have had any idea

what the church would grow to become and mean
for the wider community?

Had they anticipated the significance

of the impact and blessings
of this living, giving community of faith?

While none of us can answer such questions for our own selves

much less look back and wonder with certitude,

there is something we do know:

they selected Christmas Day

as the best moment in time

to give birth to a movement of God.

So, too, did God.

“For God sent the only Son into the world,

not to condemn the world,

but that the world might be saved through him.”

God had a yearning, a hunger, an ache to see the gospel lived out in
community.

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus
that all the world should be registered.*

This was the first registration

and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

All went to their own towns to be registered.

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee

to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem,

*because he was descended from the house and family
of David.*

He went to be registered with Mary,

to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son

and wrapped him in bands of cloth,

and laid him in a manger,

*because there was no place for them in the
inn.*

Times of Yearning

Do you ever wonder what matters more to you,

the timing of the birth of Jesus or the purpose God fulfills?

Recently a nice woman stood in our church lobby

and challenged me to explain

why the Church celebrates Christmas in December

when there is a chance that

the registration of Joseph and Mary in
Bethlehem

may have occurred in
springtime.

I acknowledged her powers of observation and courage to ask
questions.

I told her that, speaking personally,

I was much more concerned about

and delighted in

the power of the Spirit

to be made manifest on earth

in order to better connect us

with God and one
another,

than I was about the church's adoption of December 25

as a time set aside to rejoice in Jesus' birth.

I then invited her to come back and bring her reason and faith

to study and move with us through the liturgical seasons.

I have never seen anyone move so quickly

in her haste to vacate these premises.

Even though she is clearly departed, her question hovers over the
story.

She is not alone in her wondering of this overlapping of sacred and secular.

“Historians have had difficulty

with Luke’s report of the census under Quirinius.

Has Luke misplaced the census

which came later after Archelaus was deposed as ruler of Judea

and the country placed under the governor of Syria?

The debates fill the [biblical] commentaries,

but regardless of the reliability of Luke’s sources,

his purpose is clear: to tie sacred to secular history.

...God uses Ceasar Augustus.

The coming of Christ is not hidden in a corner;

Rome is joined to Bethlehem.

The world is God’s,

and the gospel is for God’s world.

The Good News does not belong to the church

which may decide to share it with the world.

Rather, Mary’s baby is God’s yes to the world,

which includes us.”

(Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, Preaching the New Common Lectionary, p. 58-59)

A church born on December 25th

is a church that proclaims God's yes to the world,

which includes us,

which includes the whole people of God.

A church born on December 25th

would grow up to be host and home

to the lost, the last and the least.

Here is a church that declared both men and women can serve,

equally, in a united front, both blessed and a blessing

as deacons and elders and clergy,

and did so long before many of our sister
congregations

hoisted the same banner.

Here is a church that voted in the affirmative

during the tumultuous Sixties

that people could sit wherever they so chose,

regardless of race or creed,

because Christ is the Host and we are
all guests,

and equal and perfect in the
eyes of God.

Here is a church that, rather than voting,

decided to simply and profoundly live out the gospel
by being open and accepting of all of God's children,
recognizing that true love is real,
that we're not qualified to judge
anyone else,
yet we are called to celebrate
what God creates and whom Christ
brings together.

Here is a church that has fun,

one that knows how to laugh and love and live.

Here is a church that has a deep Christian spirituality

which has fostered a broad appreciation

for civic ministry and community involvement,

a church that is open 8 days a week, and has been so for 90
years.

No wonder our utility bills are high!

There are scuff marks on the church walls,

oft-repaired benches in the church park,

stains from countless spills on church carpets,

holes in the soles of our shoes from walking
the walk...

Here is a church where the building and the Bible and the Body of
Christ

are worn smooth from much use and love,

making them – us – real.

We're like the Velveteen Rabbit – well-worn but not worn out.

Anyone think Jesus would have it any other way?

Do you think God would rather we have low bills and quiet hallways,

sparse prayer lists, shallow conversations and even shallower conversions?

Let the church shudder! Perish the thought.

The Good News is that here is a church with a brilliant history and bright future.

Times of Yearning

A while back I was blessed to be invited to submit a sermon manuscript

for publication in the Biblical Preaching Journal.

The Biblical Preaching Journal has since ceased publishing,

and I sure hope my sermon wasn't the cause.

Anyway, the editor asked for a description of the ecclesial context

in which the sermon was originally proclaimed.

In other words, write a paragraph that describes the church and community

in which the Word, the message, the sermon was delivered.

Here is what I shared about our significant congregation and city:

“Our ecclesial context is an urban Disciples congregation

that attracts and serves folks from all walks of life.

By being located in downtown Decatur,

a small city directly adjacent to Atlanta,

we are afforded a multitude of opportunities

to witness to the goodness of God's love.

*By being easily accessible by car, mass transportation, and
sidewalks,*

*we are blessed with families who commute or walk to
worship*

and do community service here.

We have -- finally, thankfully -- figured out

that we cannot do everything or meet every need.

We are called to do some things,

and we are challenged to do them very well.

Please, join with Jesus Christ in praying for us

as we become ever more intentional

about being authentic, faithful, effective, and open

*to the mystery, mission, and magic of the
Spirit.*

Please know that you are in our prayers as well."

Times of Yearning

Our founders had a yearning, a hunger, an ache

to live out the gospel in their community.

We gratefully, humbly, thankfully

stand on their shoulders and serve Christ in the city.

We intentionally choose daily to follow

a Mighty God, Everlasting Counselor, Prince of Peace

who has a yearning, a hunger, an ache

to see the gospel lived out in community.

The world is God's, and the gospel is for God's world.

Mary's baby is God's yes to the world,

which includes us...

and every living soul on this blue planet spinning in
the sky.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!