

## **Christmas Eve, 2009**

One of the most anxiety-riddled moments in my ministry occurred several years ago when I served a church in another city. The Christmas Eve worship service was being broadcast far and wide on television. The pews were packed with people. My job that evening was twofold - I was to light the Christ candle in the Advent wreath and preach the sermon. The latter turned out to be a walk in the park compared to the former. You would think that lighting one candle would be easy, wouldn't you? I thought so too, which is why I had not rehearsed, which was a big mistake. The wreath was huge and suspended at an angle on wires so that everyone could see it. For a reason that must have made sense to somebody, the worship leaders were to stand behind and a little above the wreath, which meant that I had to reach over the wreath to light the wick of the candle without being able to see what I was doing. I groped around with the candle lighter for what seemed an eternity. It was a no go. The people in the congregation squirmed; the people in TV land squirmed. I was perspiring, but I could not get that Christ candle lit. As my self-consciousness increased to a life-threatening level, the young Scottish minister standing next to me turned and whispered in my ear, "Go deep, Joanna. Go deep!" I reached over and down one more time and behold, there was light shining in the darkness.

I was grateful for being rescued from embarrassment that Christmas Eve and have been grateful ever since for the words "Go deep," because they capture so perfectly what happens on Christmas Eve. Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things seen and unseen, goes deep, takes the plunge into the heart of the human condition. "What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

For weeks, if not months, you and I have been getting ready for Christmas. Some of you were smart enough to buy your gifts early; some of you even them wrapped them weeks ahead. Others of us, me included, end up grocery shopping and gift wrapping at the last minute. I was ridiculously happy when I saw that our CVS would be open on Christmas day, because I always seem to have forgotten something. I sent Al out last Christmas looking for eggs, which he finally found at a little Latino food market five miles away.

The Christian church sets aside four whole weeks for the purpose of preparing for the coming of the Christ child. My question tonight is this: Are you ready to receive him? In the sense of making room for him in your heart, in the sense of being open to his coming into your life with healing and light and hope? Or are you all filled up already with your own stuff- your work, your worries, your self-consciousness? The night I was trying to light the Christ candle, I certainly was all filled up with myself. If Joseph and Mary, heavy with child, had come to the door of my heart, I would have said, "Sorry. Busy. No room for you here!"

This Christmas Eve, I am hoping for another chance to welcome the Christ child. I need him. The world needs him too, more than ever. I think of the child's letter to God that reads, "Dear God, are you real? Some people don't believe it. if you are, you'd better do something quick. Love, Harriett Anne."

The late Scottish preacher Stuart McWilliam wrote, "It took God centuries to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. From creation through the calling of Abraham, the choice of Moses, the separating out of his chosen people with their strange, tortured history, its seeming disasters that turned out not to be disasters after all, its seeming victories that turned out to be the most monumental defeats. All of it culminating in the birth of a child in Bethlehem. Even after all those centuries, how few there were who were really ready to receive him." (1)

John wrote candidly about the un-readiness of the people: “He was in the world and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. . .”

Jesus the Savior was born in Bethlehem, but Bethlehem was not ready, even though the prophet had written centuries before, “And thou Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not the least among the princes of Judah, for out of thee shall come a governor who shall rule my people. . .” There was no place prepared for him in Bethlehem on the night he was born.

Jesus came to spread the good news of salvation, but those in charge of the religious establishment felt threatened. They were not ready to receive him. He came to release men and women from the prisons of sin and separation they had built for themselves, but the people turned out to love those prisons more than freedom. They were not ready for release.

He said all sorts of things the people were not ready to hear:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

“If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek as well.”

“Whoever becomes humble like a child will inherit the kingdom of heaven.”

People rejected his ideas because they were already filled up with their own ideas. He became such a problem for the people that they begged for him to be crucified rather than the common criminal named Barabbas. They nailed him on the cross. The very ones who had prayed that the Messiah would come and save them couldn't tolerate him when he came.

Given the way things turned out, you have to wonder if God's clock was a little off. Yes, his mother loved him and the crowds too, for a while, but when it ended as it did, you think, “Hmm. Maybe God should have waited a while. In a few hundred years, things might have been different.” Perhaps 2009 would have

been a better century. If Christ were born today, would things have turned out differently?

Paul the Apostle certainly would not have thought so. In his letter to the Galatians, he wrote, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman. . .” From the divine perspective, God chose exactly the right time for Jesus, the long-expected Savior to come into the world.

Is Christmas coming too soon this year? If it seems so, the fault rests not with God, who rules over both time and eternity, but with us, who are prone to say, “Give me a minute whenever something transformative is about to happen.”

In a church I once served, the task of informing the bride that the wedding ceremony was about to start fell to the property manager, a fine Polish gentleman named Mr. Pitka. One day, when he knocked on the door of the bride’s room, an anxious voice on the other side of the door said, “I’m not quite ready. Please come back in a few minutes.” Mr. Pitka returned, knocked again, and received the same answer. With that, he took out his keys, unlocked the door and said to the bride, “You are ready!”

I say tonight, “You are ready!” Forget about *getting* ready. Just be ready for Christ to come into your heart, into your home, into this broken world. He will do the saving work if you and I will only make him room. All he asks is that we receive him. He will do the rest.

I leave the Morningside Christmas Eve service each year feeling as if, in some deeply important way, I have been opened up. For a time, I see everything differently, and it’s not just the candlelight. The music does the heavy lifting on Christmas Eve. As the beautiful sounds sweep over us, we are drawn, each one of us, deep into the fullness of time. There is no other moment like it in all the rest of the year.

In Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," Ebenezer Scrooge rushes to the window of his room after the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future have left him. He has waked up to how miserably he had lived his life and how miserably he has treated others in his life. "What's today?" he calls out.

"Christmas Day!" a boy shouts back. Scrooge is ecstatic. Dickens writes, "...the Time before him was his own in which to make amends." Christmas comes in the fullness of time. Nothing is hopeless. Everything is still possible.

The greatest thing about Christmas is what God wants to give:

    grace upon grace,  
    light that shines in the darkness.

"When the fullness of time had come, God sent his son...." May the words and the music unlock the doors of your heart to receive him, for still he comes to meet us as we are and to keep us as his own. Alleluia. Amen.

(1) *Journal for Preachers*, 2002.