

God's Gift of Love

The Nativity of Our Lord A

Text: Luke 2:1–20]

December 24, 2010

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Back in 1969 when I began my studies at seminary,
I went to the office one day shortly after arriving on campus
to get some change to do my laundry.

Just as I turned to leave,
Dr. F. Eppling Reinartz, the beloved president of the seminary,
stepped out of his office and invited me to come in and have a seat.
I hadn't been on campus long enough to get in any trouble,
so I wondered why he was asking me
to come into his office.

I later learned that he liked to take the opportunity
to meet the new students
and get to know them personally.
Anyway, as I sat down he asked me my name.
When I told him my name was *Christopher Handlee Vige*,
he asked if *Vige* was a German name.

When I told him it was Norwegian,
he said it sounded like the German word
wiege which means *cradle*.
After looking it up in his German lexicon to be sure,
he said to me, *Mr. Vige*,
I would like to think of you as a cradle of the gospel.

Dr. Reinartz' words
made a deep impression on me that day
and have stuck with me through the years.

They also dovetail beautifully
with the meaning of
my first name, *Christopher*.
The name *Christopher* is derived from
the Greek words Χρίστος φέρω (*Christos phero*)
which means *one who bears Christ*.

A cradle of the gospel who bears Christ!
That's a tall order for anyone,
but it is especially appropriate
for someone who is called to be a pastor.
I admit that
I have not always lived up to that ideal,
but it gives me a target to shoot for.

A cradle of the gospel who bears Christ!

I would like for us to keep that in mind for a moment
as we turn our attention to the Christmas story.

As Luke recounts the circumstances
surrounding the birth of the Christ-child,
we learn that Joseph and Mary
make the journey from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem
to participate in the census
ordered by Caesar Augustus.

It was an arduous journey.
Although Nazareth and Bethlehem are only
60 miles apart as the crow flies,
the route Mary and Joseph had to travel for safety's sake
would take them 80 miles
over rugged terrain.

They had to cross mountains that soar as high as 2800' above sea level
and pass through valleys that plummet 1300' below sea level.
Today, the trip can be made by car in two to three hours.
But 2000 years ago
when Joseph walked the route leading the donkey that carried Mary,
it would have taken 8 to 10 days.

As difficult as the journey was for them
with Mary full term in her pregnancy,
the circumstances didn't get any better
when they arrived in Bethlehem.
No sooner do they get into town than Mary goes into labor.
Joseph tries to get a room in the inn,
but all the rooms are taken.

In his fatigue and distress,
he no doubt pleads with the innkeeper
for any room he has.
The best Joseph and the innkeeper can do is make a place in the stable
for the two of them to bed down
and for Mary to give birth to the child.

Luke describes their plight with beautiful simplicity:
*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 room in the inn.*

I love Luther's take on those words, *there was no room in the inn.*
Really? says Luther.
*Of course there's room,
there is always room in the inn,
but no one is willing to give up their room
for this pregnant woman.*¹

That's the reality of the world into which Jesus is born.
 Mary is forced to give birth to her son in a stable and lay him in a feeding trough
 because the world was unwilling to welcome the Christ-child.

Things really are not all that different today.
 Thousands of children are homeless and hungry,
 and the *haves* of the world do not want to be inconvenienced by a savior
 who calls them to follow him on a journey to the cross.
 The world is just as unwilling to make room for Christ today
 as it was 2000 years ago.

But while the world is not
 willing to make room for Jesus,
 what about us?

Are we willing to receive him?
 Are we willing to open our hearts
 and make a cradle for him there?
 That is the important question
 Jesus wants you and me
 to answer tonight.

Jesus is God's gift of love sent into the world to be our savior.
 He comes to us as the Messiah, the one anointed and sent by God
 to set us free from sin and give us life with God the Father.
 He surpasses all the Christmas gifts we have or will ever receive
 because through him, we receive the gift of eternal life with God.
 It is in him that we receive the gift of redemption,
 which is the true joy of Christmas.

There was no room in the inn 2000 years ago in Bethlehem
 to receive Jesus as he came into the world,
 but tonight we can make room for him in our hearts.

We can make our hearts
 a cradle to receive him
 as he comes to our lives,
 and as he dwells there,
 we can bear him to the world for all to see and behold
 the gift of God's love.

In 1872, Christina Rossetti
 wrote a poem for a magazine entitled *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*.
 A few years later the English composer, Gustav Holst, set the words to music.

The last stanza of the poem concludes with these words
*What can I give him, poor as I am?
 If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb;
 If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
 Yet what can I give him: give my heart.*²

That is the room Jesus wants from us this Christmas.
He wants a dwelling place in our hearts
so that he can come into our lives
and fill them with the blessings of his love
—the forgiveness of our sins,
the peace of God that passes all understanding,
and life with God the Father forever.



¹ Roland H. Bainton, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948), 38.

² *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, a poem by Christina Rossetti.