



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Longing for Light... We Welcome Jesus

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

December 24, 2008

*Christmas Eve (Year B)*

Luke 2:1-20

During my seminary days in Louisville I served as an assistant pastor at a local church. One Sunday, a week or two before Christmas, the pastor and I were invited to dinner at the home of some dear members of the church after worship. We arrived at the house and were promptly seated in the living room while the couple went to finish getting the meal on the table.

The living room was filled with beautiful Christmas decorations of all types. It was a feast for the senses. The smell of pine needles mingled with the aromas from the sumptuous meal being prepared in the kitchen. Lights twinkled on every branch of the Christmas tree, and even on the stems of the potted plants scattered around. It was a mixture that overwhelmed the senses.

Just as she was leaving, our hostess placed a candle on the table before us, and announced with delight: “This is a musical candle. It plays when it’s burned. But I’ve discovered that it will also play when it’s in the sunlight.”

Beaming, obviously proud of having discovered a way for the candle to work without its being consumed, she placed the candle squarely in a ray of light shining through the window onto the coffee table before us. And off she went.

The first two times the Christmas carol played weren’t so bad. My mind reflected on the beauty of the room and the pleasing sounds. But it soon became obvious: This high-pitched squeal of a musical candle was going to play the same carol over and over until the sun mercifully set or our hostess returned with the dinner bell.

By the tenth time through, my ears were ringing and that blessed song of joy and peace was causing untold pain and anguish. It was too much. The song was simply hammered into my head, and there was no room left for the mystery and wonder of it all.

If we need anything tonight, it’s to recover the sense of wonder at Christmas once more. Somehow, at least for some of us, the busyness of the season robs us of a sense of the holy—the places to be and things to do and shopping lists to tackle and cookies to bake and family to entertain have so overwhelmed us that all we can do is endure Christmas, not welcome the wonder of it all.

And I don’t know about you, but it’s been tougher than ever this year to prepare for Christmas in a world so filled with conflict. The ongoing war against terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq and other parts of the world certainly makes us realize that we have far to go toward the peace God has promised. Throw in a stock market collapse, an uncertain job market, and a housing crisis and you discover how tough it is to welcome the wonder in a world that’s literally ripped apart by turmoil, poverty, warfare, and despair.

Perhaps that's why Chris Rice begins a song about the birth of Jesus with these words:

*"Tears are falling, hearts are breaking  
How we need to hear from God  
You've been promised, we've been waiting  
Welcome Holy Child  
Welcome Holy Child"*

On the surface, singing about tears falling and hearts breaking may seem a strange way to begin a song written for this season of comfort and joy. But it's closer to what Christmas is truly about than a million lines about silver bells and trees of green.

Christmas is about how God sees the brokenness of the world and decides to do something about it. It's about the people of God watching and waiting for the promised savior and finding him in a manger. It's about a people who sat in a land of deep darkness—longing for the light—suddenly finding themselves basking in the light of Christ. It's about all of our hopes and fears meeting in God. It's about *our* longing merging with the longing of God for a day of justice and peace. Christmas is about God entering the hurt of the world to bring wholeness—to bring *shalom*, and God knows we need that now.

But here's the good news: It's precisely into this world that God is born. Not to lift us out, but to dwell with us here.

I like how Archbishop William Temple put it. He wrote: "Let us at all costs avoid the temptation to make our Christmas worship a withdrawal from the stress and sorrow of life into a realm of unreal beauty. It was into the real world that Christ came, into the city where there was no room for him, and into a country where Herod, the murderer of innocents, was king. Christ came not to shield us from the harshness of the world, but to give us the courage and the strength to bear it; not to snatch us away by some miracle from the conflicts of life, but to give us peace, by which we may be calmly steadfast while the conflicts rage, and to be able to bring the torn world the healing that is peace."

Ultimately, that's the wonder of this season. The mystery is that God chooses not to lift us up to heaven, but to become flesh and live among us, full of grace and truth. God chooses to enter the messiness of our world and, from the cradle of hay, continue the process of redemption for all creation.

So tonight, I invite you to simply gaze into the cradle once more. Look upon these symbols around you, and especially notice the look of wonder in the eyes of our children. They are keys for us—not for unlocking the mystery—but for entering it, for standing in the face of it—for welcoming the wonder that God chooses to dwell with us, full of grace and truth.

About five years ago, I saw an amazing thing happen here in the sanctuary one Sunday during the choir's Christmas cantata. While they were singing, the youth and some children acted out the scenes of the Christmas story. There were shepherds and angels and all the other characters in the story, including the cutest flock of sheep you've

ever seen. One of those sheep was my then 2-year-old daughter, Rachel.

It was Rachel the Sheep, in fact, who helped me discover what I'd always missed in Luke's story. Did you happen to notice how Jesus changes everyone's identity in Luke's story? Mary became not wife, but mother. Joseph was transformed from husband to father. God's identity changed too—God, in the babe in the manger, now human with us. God with us, but we dare not miss it—human with us too.

When I saw Rachel after church, she came running up to me. She still had on her sheep's costume, but there was something different about it. She was now wearing a halo as well. Somehow, the one who had entered the story as a sheep had come out as an angel.

The same thing happens to the shepherds in Luke's story. They become something else too. Only their job doesn't change. They are just given new lines to speak. And when they leave, they go to share all that they had seen and heard.

You know what that makes them, don't you? Messengers. Witnesses. Angels, in a sense.

So what were you when you entered this story tonight? Husband or wife? Parent or child? Student or teacher? Boss or employee? Whatever role you play, it all changes when you peer into the manger and see the child before you. You will walk back into the places from which you came, to continue the tasks which are yours, but you will do so as one given a new identity by the child lying in a manger. What will you hear? Who will you be? You will hear the sound of God's whispers through the babe in the manger—"You are my beloved child. You are my messenger of hope. You are my ambassador of peace."

And then, it will happen to us as it did for the shepherds. We will leave here perplexed and amazed by what we've been a part of, but we'll also go as those sent to bear witness to the light—to share the news of a great joy which is for all people—that for us a savior is born. Let us who have been longing for the light, welcome the wonder of it all by welcoming Jesus, the light no darkness shall ever overcome.