

Christmas Eve 2018 Message: Christmas Matters

“What child is this who, lay to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
While shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary.”

What child is this? If he was simply a child born 2000 years ago and died, then we would say he was a lovely child, loved by his mother – and that would be the end of it. Our journey here on this night would be only about tradition and gathering with family and friends. It would be “nice”. The candles – *beautiful*, the flowers – *delightful*.

There is a sweet emotion floating around this sanctuary for all to embrace and pass along! An excitement for tomorrow! Relief – or perhaps resignation – that we have done all we can do to prepare and that soon we will simply have to say with a sigh, “That’s going to have to be enough!”

What child is this? If he was simply a child born 2000 years ago and died, then we would say he was a lovely child, loved by his mother – and that would be the end of it. But, have you noticed that history *has never let that happen?* History *has never* been able to shake loose his name or stow it in some history book to be forgotten. Not even our excitement over Santa Claus has kept us from gathering tonight to celebrate his birth, as we lean on the end of one year poised to enter our new year, hoping for new birth in different places and spaces of our own lives.

What child is this? Someone *more*. *Something* more. A reflection of God. A reminder that we are created by God – in God’s image – and invited to participate in God’s plan – a world of peace, hope, love and joy. A *life* of peace, hope, love and joy. These are the thoughts that have been going through my mind as I have been preparing for this mysterious and magical night. And my reflection has brought me to two conclusions. The first is that *Christmas matters*. Above and beyond the ho ho ho’s and the fa la la la la’s – *Christmas matters*.

Are you familiar with what has been called “The Christmas Truce?” It is a compelling example of how much Christmas matters. The year was 1914. The battles were fierce and long during the years of World War I. Yet, on Christmas Eve of that year, a spontaneous truce broke out on the

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Western Front. It began with the singing of “Stille Nacht” (Silent Night) from the German trenches which was heard across the wasteland known as “No Man’s Land” in the British trenches. This was eventually responded to with carols from the British soldiers. By daylight the soldiers met each other in that so called “No Man’s Land” where they shook hands, exchanged small gifts of beer, cigarettes, food, and even played a bit of soccer. They shared with each other *their names*.

How to explain such a thing? It’s the power of Christmas! *Christmas matters!* Everything that the Christ personifies: hope, joy, love, and most especially in this situation *peace – was more powerful than war that day* and the next – for this went on for several days. Within the heart of each soldier was the desire for peace. And they remained at peace until orders from the generals came down demanding that they return to the battle of might against might until one side won and the other lost. What a cost.

It was because of the birth of Jesus, the Christ-mas, that a certain man by the name of John Wesley in the 1700s went about England ministering to those in need and inviting, among others, the working class to participate in a spiritual life. He ultimately became the founder of the Methodist Church, which is why we are here today. Did you know that he is credited by many historians for averting a civil war in England? France was not so fortunate as they entered into the Bloody French Revolution; but England worked out their unrest in peaceful ways. *Christmas matters.*

It was because of the birth of Jesus, the Christ-mas, that a certain man – the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – sought to break down the walls of racism *without violence*. Surely we have a long way to go with a long way to go, but it came about because MLK, Jr believed in Christmas. *Christmas matters.*

Today, because of the birth of Jesus, this Christ-mas we are celebrating, United Methodist Churches and other denominations, too, are housing refugees, are writing our Congress for better laws, and are adding our voices to protest oppression even as we participate in tangible acts of compassion, like financing and packaging 60,000 meals for Rise Against Hunger, collecting coats for the Bridgeport Rescue Mission, providing Christmas gifts to Boys & Girls Village, traveling to Appalachia and to areas

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in need in Connecticut to engage our young people and adults in home repair for families living in poverty, gathering together much desired items for children in Haiti in connection with our greater United Methodist Church—and the opportunities to make a difference in the world because of Christ-mas go on and on! This week on Thursday, we will prepare and host the community dinner for those who are food insecure and for all who simply wish to gather in. Tangible ways of changing our world. *Christmas matters.*

It *mattered* that Jesus was born. That he grew up. That he taught. That he healed. That he embodied God in a way that people could better grasp a personal and compassionate God who hates evil but is long suffering, who is gracious and interested in us living a better way.

On this night of nights, we acknowledge that this day *matters*. That Jesus' embodiment of the Christ *matters*. That's one conclusion I came to in my reflection this year.

And the other is this...*It's left up to us to make Christmas matter every day* by continuing the work of Jesus in the world every day. As Paul referred to us, "you are the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

In other words, if fighting is going to stop in our world, it's up to us. If the hungry are to be fed, it's up to us. If the hopeless are to have hope, it's up to us. If we're going to have individual peace, it requires a spiritual journey. If we're going to weather the storms of life well, a spiritual journey is the way. If we're going to be really good lovers – of people, of this world, growing deeper and *wiser* with time rather than just *older*, a spiritual journey is going to be the teacher.

The reason we continue to celebrate Jesus' birth over 2000 years later is because of two millennia of men and women before us who lived their lives as the Body of Christ, and those who continue to embody that spirit today.

Is it your turn to deepen your commitment to growing and healing?

Or maybe is this the time for you to start again, or perhaps for the first time? Is Christmas Eve enough? Or do you want more? What have you been missing? Have you noticed something missing?

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Innovative educator, Monika Hardy, has a motivational philosophy that might be helpful to you in discerning this. It's 4 words.

"Notice. Dream. Connect. Do.

(But, she says) We fail to *notice* because we're busy keeping busy.

We fail to *dream* because dreaming implies that we have to take a risk to realize our dream.

We fail to *connect* because we might get rejected.

And we fail to *do* because we haven't *noticed*, we haven't *dreamed*, and we haven't *connected*." (*What To Do When It's Your Turn [and it's always your turn]*, p. 35.)

Tonight I am inviting you to *notice* the invitation of Christmas.

I'm inviting you to *dream* again – if perhaps you have stopped dreaming about what life *could be* for you, in all its richness.

I'm inviting you to *connect* with other noticers and other dreamers who gather here on Sundays to work on their own peace, joy, love and hope *and* on the peace, joy, love and hope of the *world*.

I'm inviting you to then take what happens for you on Sundays into your life so that all that you *do* may be blessed and *matter more*. *Notice. Dream. Connect. Do.*

Christmas matters. And it's up to us to make it matter everyday of the year. It's your turn to decide if this is the year to make a new commitment to yourself. I hope you do. I'd love to see you again on Sunday morning.

In the meantime, I wish you and your family every blessing as this Christmas reveals to you what matters in the world and in your life today. May you find hope, love, peace, joy – and the Christ there. Blessings on the journey. Amen.