

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Luke 2:1-20

What does one do when one cannot be where one wants to be for Christmas? This happens often when one is serving overseas in the military, studying abroad at a university, or hung up in some airport in an attempt to get home for Christmas. Or, one might be "home" but is working someplace that cannot close, like a hospital. If one is lucky, one can attempt having a "normal" Christmas with another estranged individual in the vicinity. This is what I did when I spent a year in Germany after graduating from seminary; I was in Munich and a college buddy of mine was in Vienna, and we had a modest Christmas celebration of our own at the international student center where I lived. It was a pretty quiet place over the Christmas holiday because most of the other students, of course, were away.

But nevertheless, we did the "normal" things; we went to church, we had a bite to eat, and we exchanged gifts. It may not have been where we wanted to be for Christmas, but we made do.

I recall another Christmas when, though we were staying with Grandma in town, we had plans to go out to the farm where Mom's uncle and aunt were having us over for dinner after Christmas Eve church. They made it back to the farm a few minutes before we ventured out from Grandma's...but those few minutes made a world

of difference. When we were headed out of town, a wall of North Dakota blizzard whiteout hit us and the only thing we could do was turn around and head back to Grandma's.

Not exactly where we planned on being on Christmas Eve, but we made do.

Grandma didn't have much for us to prepare for our Christmas Eve dinner; I might take after her in that regard, in fact. The menu that night ended up being tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, which was a much more modest offering than the feast that awaited us at the farm. But we were able to make it out there the next day and enjoy what we would've eaten the evening before had there not been a blizzard.

And we made do with the essentials. We went to church, ate our grilled cheese sandwiches, and, as I recall, even opened some Christmas gifts.

But, because the message of Christ's birth was there both at Grandma's and in Germany, it was still Christmas. Christmas is never nullified by less-than-ideal circumstances, and you might find, as I have, that you remember those times when Christmas was more challenging for you than when everything went smoothly.

On the Western Front during the First World War -- Christmas of 1914, to be exact -- one of history's most famous truces occurred, with German and English soldiers singing Christmas carols to each

other across No Man's Land and eventually meeting face-to-face to exchange brandy, tobacco, and sweets. Of course, everyone and everything (including war) was much more gentlemanly then, and even such gentlemanly moments became rarer as the First World War dragged on. The point is clear, though: The message of "peace on earth, goodwill toward men" became real when those soldiers put down their weapons. And having been, for the most part, steeped in the Christian faith of their respective homelands, they genuinely knew what Christmas was about. Christmas was still Christmas, in spite of the circumstances.

While we cannot function today on such assumptions -- and expect everything, including war, to stop for Christmas -- we can still "be Christmas" to both strangers and friends, regardless of the circumstances. It ultimately boils down to what and who we're celebrating rather than where we happen to be. And we can still be the peace and goodwill of Christmas wherever we are.

On the subject of place, much ink has been spilled on the less-than-ideal neonatal conditions for the infant Jesus at Bethlehem. This has, in part, to do with the assumptions about the accommodations available to weary travelers like Mary and Joseph in the ancient world. I would be counted among those who assumed that inn-keeping back then was analogous to operating a hotel today. But the hospitality industry as we now know it is a rather recent phenomenon. The most that would've been available to Mary and Joseph

after their long journey from Nazareth would've been a guest room in an otherwise private residence.

Perhaps you, like me, have inserted a stingy, villainous innkeeper into the Christmas story from the second chapter of Luke. If you read the text, though, no such innkeeper is there, and I would add that the related narrative of some kind of housing discrimination isn't in the text, either. Thus, many of us for a long time have been led to assume that Jesus was born in the Bethlehem stable because of cruel and unsympathetic unseen characters in the story; yet, somehow, we never figured out that the reason they're unseen is because they were never in the story to begin with!

Of course, the very modest environment of the Bethlehem stable where Christ was born is entirely fitting for the Christ he would become -- the King who rode not on a stallion but instead on a donkey and who dined not with other royalty but instead with outcasts and sinners. This is no invented, imagined narrative; indeed, this is all entirely consistent with who we confess Christ to be -- the King who came not to be served but to serve. A stable for his birthplace, therefore, is exactly what it should have been.

Hardly an ideal location from the standpoint of modern medicine, but from the standpoint of Christ's life and example, it's perfect!

For me, the fastest way to ruin Christmas would be to hold the

celebration of it to some ideal, which would inevitably lead to disappointment because that ideal could never be reached. Christmas is always Christmas no matter where we are or how we're feeling, and it doesn't require us to be in the right place or in the right mood to celebrate it. Rather, it merely asks us to hear the story of Christ's birth, and to glean from it a glimmer of hope, and, if possible, to share that hope. That, I believe, is one of the lessons of the Christmas Truce of 1914; for a moment, people experienced the hope that God can and will transform the world through the love of his Son Jesus Christ.

The angel said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10b-11). That promise in the angel's words is where it all comes together: A Savior is born! Nothing -- not our location, not our mood, not our circumstances, not wars or insurrections -- can prevent the promise of Christmas from being proclaimed. So if you're a long way from home, or eating grilled cheese sandwiches at Grandma's instead of the magnificent feast out at the farm, or in some sodden trench along the Western Front, Christmas will always be Christmas as long as the promise of Christ is heard.

Amen.