



**“Christmas Message - 2019”**  
**Scripture – Luke 2**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Tuesday, December 24, 2019**

A colleague reminds me that some of you are here “under duress, having been dragged away from video games to carol singing, from cocktails to (candlelight communion). These days, many children, young adults, and their parents...are more familiar with Rudolph, Frosty, and Santa than the stories of magi, shepherds, and the Holy Family.”<sup>1</sup> If there are any here who think tonight is all about escaping the hard realities of the real world, nothing could be further from the truth. Christ came into the real world, not a Disney fantasy world.

My wife, Camilla, came across a brief letter to the editor that her mother had written to the newspaper in Louisville decades ago. She writes,

It was late afternoon on Christmas Eve, 1942. I was a ‘working war bride’ of 11 months traveling to my family home for a visit. My husband was overseas at a then secret air base in the Near East, a test pilot with the Army Air Corps. I learned many months later it was the Persian Gulf Command.

The westbound L&N train left the 10<sup>th</sup> and Broadway station filled with civilians and several hundred servicemen. Every coach was packed. Many passengers sat on boxes and suitcases in the aisles.

In the first hour of the journey silence prevailed except for an occasional baby’s cry or quiet conversations. The train stopped for 10 minutes at Irvington, Kentucky, and some left the train briefly to buy a sandwich or a piece of the famous chess pie at the lunch counter of the old Irvington Hotel near the tracks.

When the train pulled out, the cold winter sky darkened and all was quiet. Then, a soldier broke the silence when he began to sing ‘Silent Night.’ Others quickly joined in and soon everyone was singing (the beautiful carol of the ‘Holy infant so tender and mild’). Other Christmas carols followed, and it created an amazing bond of fellowship. (Complete strangers experienced a heartfelt connection with one another).

As civilians left the train at small town stations, they were wished “Merry Christmas,” with cheerful smiles and sincere handshakes. It has been my fond and lasting memory of goodwill and my hope that those soldiers survived the war.

Celebrating the birth of Christ unleashes a dynamic force that can break down walls, turn strangers into friends, and draw people ever so close to one another. That force is none other than God's love.

The Jewish prophets helped us understand that the Creator of heaven and earth is a just and merciful God "abounding in steadfast love." Jesus added to the prophets by opening our eyes to the depth of God's love. It is a love that will not remain untouched by suffering. It is a love that possesses a special affinity for those who dwell in darkness and desperately need the light of hope.

At Christmas, many of us create a festive atmosphere in our homes like no other time of the year. We decorate Christmas trees with cherished ornaments that hold special memories. We put up strings of lights, hang wreaths and stockings, light candles, wrap presents, and many of us gather with family to enjoy a feast.

By comparison, the first Christmas was Spartan. Thanks to the decree by the Roman Emperor Augustus, everyone had to trek to their hometown to be registered. The Roman army that occupied the land wanted to insure they were paid the hefty taxes they demanded. I suspect they also wanted to remind people who was in command and who controlled their lives. It was a dark time for those in Palestine.

The decree meant Joseph and a very-full-with-child, Mary, had to make an 80 mile trek from the small hamlet of Nazareth, south to the city of David – Bethlehem. Not only was this poor young couple far from family, they could not secure proper lodging and had to bunk with the animals. Soon after arriving, Mary delivered her firstborn child. She wrapped Jesus in cloths and laid him in the animals' feeding trough.

But that humble birth signaled a burst of light, a surge of hope. The birth of Jesus declares that God is not a distant deity who creates the world and then retires to a celestial palace. God loves our world and is present in our world. Love is the driving force behind joy, behind peace, behind hope. Jesus embodied love and made it clear that there is no higher calling for any of us than to become lovers of God's creation and one another. Love heals, love inspires, love reconciles and love brings light to the dark corners of our world.

Last year on Christmas Day, I received one of my most treasured Christmas cards ever. Technically it was not a card. It was an email from a dear friend and he had entitled it "A Christmas Card." My friend is in prison and the commissary's short supply of Christmas cards sold out quickly so he resorted to email to send his Christmas message. He wrote,

I just got back from a Christmas Eve concert put on by fellow inmates in the visiting room where a group of whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians and combinations thereof had gathered. The group included Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and no doubt others. All joined in singing Christmas carols.

The musical instruments consisted only of a single electric guitar and an electric keyboard organ each played by an inmate. The sheets of Christmas carol lyrics were hastily typed by inmates and were full of typos; there was 'proclaim' and 'No well' among others.

Perhaps it was just the season, perhaps it was the passage of the First Step Act this week cutting some sentences by up to half, perhaps it was something a little bit more, but there was clearly a presence in that room tonight, AND never before have the voices of 50 mostly tone deaf men singing Silent Night, Joy to the World, O Holy Night, Feliz Navidad and many others, ever sounded so beautiful. There is clearly hope in the world.

MERRY CHRISTMAS! Love and best wishes.

Two thousand years ago a babe was born in Bethlehem. But the celebration of that birth would have run out of steam centuries ago if we were only celebrating the birth of God into our world as a one-time event. Christ continues to be born in the human heart whenever we:

Weep with a friend who grieves the loss of their dear one;  
Forgive someone who has harmed us;  
Work for justice for those struggling under oppression;  
Visit someone who is lonely;  
Show respect to people unlike ourselves;  
Build bridges to reach people of different races and religions;  
Sit with someone who is in the final stages of life.

God conceived an unthinkable plan to hatch hope in our world. Open your heart wide this night so that Christ may be born in you.

#### NOTES

1. Bruce Epperly, "Lectionary Commentary," *processandfaith.org*, for December 24, 2019.