

Sermon for Christmas Eve  
Monday, December 24, 2018  
“The Story of a Birth”

Text: Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-16

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was listening to a sermon preached by the pastor of the campus church at Harvard, The Rev. Professor Jonathan Walton. He was talking about a book he had read by an author named Ruth Whitman, *America, the Anxious: How our pursuit of happiness is creating a nervous wrecks*. He noted how her book was focused on America’s fixation on happiness and positive thinking. He was the more Americans spend time with feel-good efforts and projecting the happiness in our life, the more we try to make everything look as if everything is ok, anxiety levels and instances of depression increase. Some of what Walton concluded from reading that book, was that we are more willing to paint a rosy picture of our lives than to confront the difficulties in our lives. He used that tendency of our culture as the context to talk about the Gospel reading for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, where he exhorted his listeners to be ready for hardships that are coming and ignoring suffering in favor of focusing on self-help and self-fulfillment makes more anxious, nervous, and disappointed. Now the reason I found his sermon so compelling was not to put a damper on Christmas by citing themes from an Advent sermon. But the reason I found his sermon so compelling was because it made me think about how important Jesus’s birth really is for us today.

The story of the Nativity is a story about a birth. None of us can remember our birth, but perhaps the story of your birth was told to you by your mother or father. When I was a boy, every year on the day before my birthday, my mother would give me the details of where she was and what she was doing at precisely that particular hour. About all I can remember is that sometime after she went to vote in the presidential election on Tuesday, November 5, 1968, my dad took her to the hospital, where she agonized all night until I was born at 9:22 on the morning of November 6. Then within the next few hours, while my mother remained sedated, my dad went to fill out the paperwork for my birth certificate. Unable to remember that he and my mother had picked out the name Christopher, in a moment of haste—as my father told the story—he told the registrar that my name would be Norman, Jr.

For most of us, the details of our birth story is not all that important, but for a little baby born in Bethlehem of Judea over 2000 years ago, the details matter, and St. Luke the Evangelist gave us those details in the Gospel we just heard a few moments ago. Luke gave us many details about the birth, but he left out a lot of details, too. He didn't tell us anything about midwives, labor pains, contractions, water breaking, boiling water, or a comfortable bed. In fact all Luke tells us where it comes to location is that it was in a pain, unnamed stable because there was no room in an unnamed inn. In fact, the "inn" might actually have been a cave!

Our birth story probably never made it past a family dinner conversation...once or twice. This child's birth has been the topic of a season for over 2,000 years! Because this is God whose birth we celebrate. The creator of the entire universe, who loved us so much that he became one of us, subjected himself to the vulnerability of infancy, the burden of adolescence, the evolution into adulthood, just to be tortured and crucified. But that was the best way that he could show us that he was real, and that he loved us more than we could ever imagine. Jesus' being born means that our ultimate salvation is guaranteed! That's what the name of Jesus means...Yeshu'a: salvation—he saves.

Most of the time when we talk about Jesus and salvation, we're talking in a cosmic, celestial, or spiritual sense. We talk about the afterlife. We talk about the things at some future time that we have no idea when will be. We talk about new bodies, new mansions, new realities. But the birth of Jesus is important to saving us right now, in our very lives. The birth of Jesus also means the salvation from ourselves. Jesus came into a world 2,000 years ago that had lots of problems and it still had problems when he left. And we still have struggles, difficulties, suffering, disaster, and the like. But Jesus's birth and his life—God's coming down to earth and dwelling among us—gave us a chance to see how God envisions that our lives could be better. Jesus's birth and life is the way that God shows us how to get along with one another. Jesus's birth and life is the way that God shows us how he gave us the gifts and tools to overcome any difficult situation that we might face—not that it would suddenly disappear, but that we have the strength to carry on, and if we survive, we will be stronger for it.

Some people here may have lost loved ones recently or in the past year, or perhaps someone has gone through a big life change. The holiday season is notorious for causing us to reflect on those things and bring our spirits down. But the birth of Jesus, the one who saves, is what can save us from ourselves, because he gives us hope that there is a future, if we just hold on—keep on keeping on, as my grandmother used to say—whatever is worrying us will be behind us. Whatever darkness we think we’re facing, the light of Christ will illumine our path.

Today we celebrate an event from over 2000 years ago when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us—God pitched a tent in the midst of the chaotic world and became one of us to show us how to be more like him and how to live with each other. The celebration of the nativity reminds us that the love of God and the light of Christ constantly breaks into our broken world, and that gives us hope. He came to a world that was as dysfunctional then as ours is now. We just have more powerful machines and weapons, and better technology. Celebrating his birth every year reminds us that we can be kind, generous, thankful, and loving in a world that desperately needs more kindness, generosity, gratefulness, and love. So this Christmas and every Christmas, let us keep the light of Christ in our hearts. Amen.

### Resource

Sermon preached by The Rev. Jonathan L. Walton, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard University, Sunday, December 2, 2018, [http://www.harvardmemorialchurch.org/media/full\\_sunday\\_services\\_audio/service\\_18.12.02.mp3](http://www.harvardmemorialchurch.org/media/full_sunday_services_audio/service_18.12.02.mp3)