

# Can't Stop Christmas

Christmas Eve Sermon

Luke 2:1-20

## Slide 1: cows

I remember my very first Christmas Eve serving my first parish as if it were yesterday. I was born and raised in a suburb of Seattle, Washington; and up until then, Christmas had been a completely different experience than where I now found myself on that Christmas Eve in 2005. Growing up, there were no barns, cows, or fields on my street, just cul-de-sacs and houses with perfect trees shining in the windows.

But that day, that first Christmas in rural Strum, newly ordained and knowing nothing about how to do anything, a Norwegian farmer whose wife was nearing the end of her life, asked me if I could come out to the farm and give communion.

It was snowing a little and cold, also not quite the kind of Christmas I grew up with. The smell of burned coffee as if it had been sitting in

the coffee pot all day and some kind of cookie that was made by a family member hung in the air. I introduced myself. We had communion and prayer and some conversation about next steps before leaving to prepare for evening Christmas Eve worship.

But then, as I was trudging back to my car, I saw the light on in the barn, heard the cows, and smelled the manure and the hay, and I thought for just a short moment before moving on to the next thing I had to do, "This is what Christmas feels like". Christmas is a story about life and death, of struggle and joy, and of the memory of God, now finally tangible in a little food trough. It was as if I was given a little glimpse of the backstory of Christmas - not that of angels and shepherds but rather a baby crying for a warm blanket because as God, he finally felt cold and understood life as we do.

## Slide 2: St. John's at Christmas

Whether worshipping online or in person, all of us come into this beautiful

sanctuary tonight for a multitude of reasons. For all the faithful and even for those who struggle to be, perhaps this could be a place of some respite for an hour, to encounter for just a short time what Christmas feels like – a glimpse of the real backstory, to hear a word of hope in a time that is so mired in turmoil and political instability – and to put aside whatever our disagreements are about pandemics, masks and vaccines, political leaders and agendas, and recognize that Christmas still comes whether we attempt to stop it or not. In fact, we can't stop it any more than the ones who tried to stop it when Jesus was born.

### **Slide 3: Advent Table**

These are turbulent times. When living through these times, it can be easy to think that God is not doing anything or acting in the world. It can be easy to wonder that Christmas did anything at all to change anything. This is exactly what the people of God thought when Jesus was born. What is God doing? Why doesn't God redeem us? How is it that the

powers of this world continue to trod on the least powerful without any punishment? Indeed. It can be easy to despair just as the first Christians did and just as the Judeans did long ago.

With all the sights of this beautiful place and our traditions longed for, I think that the backstory of Christmas is the one we really need in this world right now. Despite our own ideas of the niceness of Christmas, that backstory is one of political urgency, of rulers and schemers trying to do their best to stop Christmas from coming like the Grinch who stole it. Therefore, one of the challenges of preaching on Christmas Eve is that all of you have heard the story and we, including me, can easily reduce it to something glorious and sweet to the point of a Hallmark movie.

### **Slide 4: Christmas Tree**

It's likely that we all know it well; which means the real back story of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God can get missed. This back story, that at the time of Jesus'

birth, shows that there were other people who would do anything in their power to stop Christ from coming to be. In fact, those people wanted to kill him from the very start of his life.

The Gospels make it quite clear the deep politics and maneuvering that occurred at that time, no different than today, that although the birth of the Christ Child was a joy to many, that birth – that child was also a threat to the status quo. This was a dangerous child. The Gospel of Matthew tells us the story of King Herod, who is so threatened by this birth that he orders all male children under the age of 2 in Bethlehem killed. Warned in a dream to flee, Mary, Joseph and Jesus make it out of there in just the nick of time.

And, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is shown as truly vulnerable when the Emperor, Ceasar Augustus, forces his parents to show up in Bethlehem for a census, a census that was no doubt hoped to reveal who this Messiah was, this Messiah who threatened the very power of

Rome itself.

And, why were the people and these powers threatened? Well, for good reason. This baby grew up to bring about a kingdom that has nothing to do with power, wealth, or military strength, but instead a kingdom that desires servanthood, sacrifice, and redemption for even the enemy. Who, as an adult, spent his time with those who were on the outside, the outcasts, the oppressed and those in poverty.

He chose no places of honor as a King, but instead chose the path to die on a cross when in reality, he had the power to send his angels down to bring vengeance and recompense upon all who truly deserved it. This was a dangerous baby indeed, one who was more interested in redeeming the world than taking it over. Still today, this is a counter-cultural child.

And, that is a message that we still need to hear on Christmas and always. We cannot forget that God is still dangerous and if God wants to

act to redeem, change things, or move around us in holy ways, there is nothing we can do to stop it. For, if you look around in our culture today and listen to our media, the Jesus we often like to claim is not counter-cultural, peaceable kingdom kind. And, I may just be bold tonight on this night of all nights to remind us of this.

Instead of the Jesus we do have according to our scripture, it's natural that we just may want to define who Jesus is based upon *our* views instead of how Scripture declares him to be. We just may want a Jesus who blesses our political agendas - a personal Jesus, who agrees with us, who wants the same outcomes as we want and gives us all our needs as we want them.

We just may want a Jesus we can admire and ponder on rather than the active Jesus who dares us to clothe those who are naked and feed those who are hungry - and to love people as he dares love us. The Jesus we may want asks very little of us, a Jesus that asks us to risk very little in our day to day lives.

## Slide 5: Caroler

So, tonight, this Christmas Eve, maybe we need this Christmas that can't be stopped, right from the manger so that we can see that he is indeed still loose in this world, but hopefully also loose yet again in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

Instead of holding on to Jesus for dear life, let us send him into the world through us, as us, even if the world tries to steal our joy from us anyway, because, contrary to this bizarre desire to protect Jesus that we have, Jesus doesn't need to be kept. He doesn't need *us* to save *him*. Jesus can't be contained even to our own imaginings. If Christ wants to be present, Christ will be present. And, if God chooses to be loose in the world, to actively change how things are, than God will do so whether we are ready or not.

But, will we recognize him in what Christmas is? Will we let him be Christ in us to do as he desires us to do, to desperately proclaim the Good News that this child will reign

over even death itself? Will we allow ourselves to be loosed into the world to be Christ for others?

*For Jesus doesn't need to be protected for us. He simply wants us to follow him. And, that is the Good News born in Bethlehem.*

### **Slide 6: Autumn Barn**

In closing, receive this poem by Wendell Berry. It reminds us that Christmas is not only a time 2,000 years ago, but it is a time open to us whenever we look to see the Incarnation around us, still actively moving in the world. The poem is called "Remembering that it happened once."

Remembering that it happened once,  
We cannot turn away the thought, As we go out, cold, to our barns toward the long night's end, that we Ourselves are living in the world  
It happened in when it first happened,  
That we ourselves, opening a stall  
(A latch thrown open countless

times Before),  
might find them breathing there, Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,  
The mother kneeling over Him,  
The husband standing in belief  
He scarcely can believe, in light  
That lights them from no source we see,  
An April morning's light, the air  
Around them joyful as a choir.

We stand with one hand on the door, Looking into another world  
That is this world, the pale daylight  
Coming just as before, our chores  
To do, the cattle all awake,  
Our own white frozen breath hanging  
In front of us; and we are here  
As we have never been before, Sighted as not before,  
our place

Holy, although we knew it not.

Amen.