

Welcome to Christmas 2020!

In the words of John Lennon's Christmas Song 'Happy Christmas (War is over)':

So this is Christmas
And what have you done
Another year over
A new one just begun

A very merry Christmas
And a happy New Year
Let's hope it's a good one
Without any fears

The line that gets me is "Let's hope it's a good one, without any fears." Do you agree?

In 2020, with the arrival of Covid-19, a contentious election, racial tensions, and challenges to our mental and physical health, there have been plenty of fear to go around. I feel like I have been a little on edge these last 10+ months... never quite able to relax... feeling the fatigue of the pandemic, anxious about decisions we have to make, and worries about the long-term effects this pandemic will have on our family.

Nobody, and I mean nobody, has navigated this pandemic perfectly. We have all fallen short. Our longing to be with others as humans, our blind side of thinking of ourselves first, our denial of the dangerous effects of the virus, and our trying to figure out how keep things as they always were contributed to the spread of the virus. There are no easy answers, here. But there is grace for us.

Jesus' birth reminds us that God acts on our behalf even when we do mess up. There is hope!

According to John Pavlovitz in his Christmas Day devotion, he writes, "The Christmas narrative is that of **Hope arriving**, largely quiet and still decidedly triumphant, in a world irrevocably altered without even being aware of it in the moment."

So to those who are feeling tired, on edge, and a little fearful... hope has arrived in the manger. Think of the difficult journey Mary and Joseph took; think of the reason they had to go to Bethlehem to be counted for taxes, and think of the fear they had of the Roman Empire. Jesus was born into a broken world... our world.

To those who are in need of healing in mind, body, and soul... hope has arrived as Jesus grew up and ministered to the last, least, and lost in his public ministry on earth. He had compassion for those who were sick and hurting and grieving. He touched and healed people with his hand and with his word.

To those who have lost loved ones this year... hope sprung forth at the empty tomb on Easter when Jesus rose from the dead. When we die in the faith, Jesus promises that we will live again. This hope in the resurrection should comfort us.

To those who are hungry, Jesus calls on his disciples to feed the people with 5 loaves and two fish. As lines grow longer at food banks, let us ask, what can I do to help?

To those who have lost their Christmas Spirit and joy this year... the angel said to the shepherds that Jesus' birth is to be good news of great joy for all people. It reminds me of when we dropped our gifts off at my parents last week, social distancing, awkward... Marcella broke the 6 foot rule and ran up and hugged grandma's legs and held on tight. Grandma said when we were leaving, 'thank you...I didn't have the Christmas Spirit... but now I do.'

The birth of Jesus was a sign of hope entering the world. It is the story of God taking on a human body to be with us and dwell with us. The angel told the fearful shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock by night, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."

This message of Jesus' birth came to the ordinary people like you and me... to shepherds in the midst of their daily work. They quickly left for Bethlehem to find the sign of a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. They shared with Mary what they were told and she treasured their words in her heart.

Did you know that the word of the year, pandemic, literally means all people... but in a destructive way. Jesus' birth is for all people in a life-giving way. We have a savior who has become one of us. He knows intimately the pain and suffering of the world. He experienced this himself. He has come to bring light and life to all people.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I can assure you that God is working tirelessly to bring good news of great joy to all people... that all people can experience hope and justice. God is working right now through the science and medical community to get us vaccinated so we can resume our lives fully.

Jesus' birth caused people to move. Mary and Joseph trusted that God had a plan... to go to Bethlehem... even if they didn't agree with it... for the shepherds to believe what the angels said about Jesus... and to go and see for themselves. Encountering Jesus in the manger caused the shepherds to go and tell it on the mountain that Jesus was born. To let their hope guide their feet. To spread the message that this baby born in a manger was the Messiah, our Savior.

I will close with Ann Weems poem, "The Christmas Spirit" from her book *Kneeling in Bethlehem*:

"The Christmas spirit is that hope which tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful and announces in the face of any Herod the world can produce and all the in doors slammed in our faces and all the dark nights of our souls that with God all things are still possible, that even now unto us a Child is born!"

Merry Christmas