

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,[a] the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,[b] praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

I

A few weeks ago, the First Presbyterian Church Weekday School presented our annual Live Nativity scene. The front steps of the church were transformed into a beautiful manger scene, complete with hay and real live cattle, sheep, donkeys, and even a camel. Families dressed in costume as the holy family, the shepherds and the magi, and our music ministry provided beautiful sounds from handbells and classical guitar. Church staff and Weekday School faculty lined the street and offered warm holiday greetings to the hundreds of people drove by in their cars or passed by on the sidewalk.

In years past, the event has been set up on our back parking deck, but because of the pandemic, last year and this year, it was moved to the front steps of the church and turned into a “drive-by” event.

It was a truly magical evening, and I loved seeing the faces of people light up as the live nativity scene came into view, especially the children.

One little boy I will never forget as long as I live. He was maybe four or five years old, and as he took in the scene, the smile on his face was suddenly replaced by a shadow. And in a loud voice, clearly dissatisfied he protested, “This is the same as it was last year!”

II

He was right, of course. Much to our dismay and discouragement, there is much about this Christmas that is the same as it was last year.

The coronavirus continues to upend all of our best-laid plans while casting long shadows over the future. Decisions that seemed like they were getting back to normal now must be recalculated and recalibrated according to ever changing risk profiles.

The divides that were so deep in our country after last year's election have not healed, but instead have grown ever deeper. The bonds that hold us together as citizens and communities and kindred continue to be stretched and pulled.

That little boy was right. In many ways, it does seem like this is all the same as it was last year.

But thank God, it's the same as it was last year.

Just like last year, on December 24, we're gathered together, be it in this room or around our screens, and we're reading about the Word of the Lord telling terrified, confused people, "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.

Just like last year, on December 24, we're gathered together, in this room on our screens, and we're breaking

bread and pouring a cup, remembering that the baby whose birth we mark this night is also named Emmanuel, God-with-us, and somehow, some way, in ways we don't always fully understand, the risen Lord is still the host at his Supper Table.

Just like last year, on December 24, we're gathered together, in this room or around our screens, and we're lighting and candles and signing Silent Night and remembering the confession of faith of John, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

III

My friend, this is just like last year, and the year before that, and the year before that. It's still the night when we remember and proclaim that God does not sit far off in the heavens somewhere, but that God comes to us, right into our messiness and brokenness and pain and fear. It's the night that we remember that this child is Emmanuel – God-with-us.

My friend, remember, God comes to you in Christ this night not because of who you are, or who your people are, or the size of your power or pocketbook, but simply because of who God is. God comes to you not because of what's happening or not happening in the halls of power or in the center of things, and not because of anything you've done or not done or said or not said, but because there is no power on earth or above the earth or beneath the earth, nothing present or to come that can separate you

from the love of God made known to you in Christ Jesus.

My friend, let us remember that this is the night that we proclaim that the entire course of human history and human destiny changed because of one baby, born to one couple, in one small place, far, far away and long, long ago.

IV

All over the world tonight, women and men and children are gathering together and telling this story and lighting candles and singing carols. They're gathering in grand churches and cathedrals and in homes and houses, just as the church has done in times of trouble and times of peace, just as the church has done in times of upheaval and in times of stability.

And so we remember the saints who have gone before us who have celebrated this night, who remind us that when we spend less of our time and attention on the doings of the powerful and privileged in the halls of power and more on the needs of the poor and the marginalized right on our own doorsteps, the church celebrates Christmas.

When we worry less about buildings and budgets more about the weightier matters of the law – righteousness and justice and mercy and grace, the church celebrates Christmas.

When we prune ourselves of the bitter thorns of strife and jealousy and anger and quarrels and dissensions and factions, and instead work together to

cultivate the sweet fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness, the church celebrates Christmas.

Yes, this is just like last year. It's still Christmas. This is still good news of great joy for all the people. The ones who look like us, and the ones who don't. The ones who pray like us, and the ones who don't. The ones who vote like us, and the ones who don't. Good news of great joy for all the people, For unto us is born a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

May we celebrate Christmas with the words of our lips.

May we celebrate Christmas with the songs of our hearts.

And may we proclaim Christmas with the work of our hands, this night and always. Amen.