

2025 Christmas EVE | Luke 2:1-20; Isaiah 9:2-7 | Love Has Come To Stay

Pastoral Prayer:

Gracious and loving God, today we celebrate your arrival in the world. We pray for the lonely, the hurting, the forgotten. Those who are standing in long lines to find the right gift... or for a bag of food for their kids.

May they find room in our hearts and in your embrace. May we be your hands when we can help... or offer hope to those in the darkness.

Jesus came to bring light to the world. May we see it. Hold it. Freely share it. Help us to love without condition, to support without reservation, and to welcome all as you have welcomed us. Amen.

Isaiah: The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 For the yoke of their burden
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Great will be his authority,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke: In those days a decree went out from Caesar 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 in the guest room.

8 Now in that same 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, 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, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, 19 and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Love comes to stay.

Our oldest daughter, Gabby, didn't know she was writing most of our message for today. It was her contribution to her church's Advent devotional this year.

Every Christmas Eve, at 10am NC time, 8am Colorado time, and 3pm UK time, McHarg's gather around our devices and listen to A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, streamed 'radio live' from Kings College, Cambridge.

"While I was in graduate school at Cambridge," she continues, "my grandma and I experienced this service live in the incredible gothic-style chapel. I can't quite describe how it felt to be thousands of miles from home, and yet worshipping with family members, at the exact same moment, all around the world.

The first carol is always *Once In Royal David's City*. The first verse is sung by one of the child members of the choir, and legend says that the soloist doesn't know he's been selected until the choir is lined up ready to process. He gets a tap on the shoulder, the organist plays the first note, and off he goes into the chapel, singing acapella, and ushering in Christmas.

I think this is a beautiful nod to all of the things about the Christmas story that are unexpected. I suspect it's a tradition that started to quell the nerves of young choristers, but nonetheless, I think it's a great metaphor. The Christmas and Epiphany stories are all about the unexpected. While the Messiah *was* expected, the journey of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection had quite a few twists and turns.

The beginning of the story alone features an astonishing pregnancy, an unusual place to lay a newborn, unusual baby gifts, a dream to leave by a different, unplanned route, and a dream to flee, unexpectedly, to another country.

I don't really like when things are unexpected. I like planned, prepared for, and fully considered. But God, you know, God does things unexpectedly sometimes.

One of the things I love about *Once In Royal David's City* is how the lyrics balance Jesus' fully human and fully divine natures, illustrating the fullness of the purpose of the incarnation.

Verse three reads:

*Jesus is our childhood's pattern; day by day like us he grew; he was little, weak, and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew;
and he feeleth for all our sadness,
and he shareth in our gladness.*

— Unexpected. And yet, such a gift. /

"This is the posture I want to take
as we pack our altogether hope, peace, love, and joy
into our toolkit for the new year.

As we view the manger one more time,
before we put it away for another year,
I will work hard to not forget
about the altogether mystery and miracle...
the gift of Christmas." (Gabby)

Not only did Jesus arrive unexpectedly...
for our whole world... he lingered.

He stayed. He dwelled with us. Love came to stay.

He didn't leave when it got difficult... when people hurt him, when we didn't understand...
or even when we killed him. Jesus stayed... loving and compassionate... corrective and
revolutionary... he stayed.

And when God saw fit to raise him from the dead, his spirit... remained. Lingered.
Still correcting. Still healing. Loving.

Gabby invites us... and so does God... "...to lean into the unexpected, knowing that God is here on
the journey, providing us with what we need."

Of course... that's what God does.

From Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, to Daniel, to Mary and Joseph,
to Jesus and the women fleeing the tomb... even to you and to me...
God shows up along the unexpected journey... feeling for all our sadness
and sharing in all our gladness... not only arriving... but lingering. Staying.

Love | has come | to stay.

Merry Christmas.