

# CHRISTMASTIDE

The second season of the Christian Year is Christmastide. Some traditions begin it on Christmas Eve and others on Christmas Day. Traditionally, Christmastide is a twelve-day holiday, beginning with Christmas Day (December 25), and running through January 5 (THE “Twelve Days of Christmas”). January 6 is then the celebration of the coming of the Magi, and thus initiates the season of Epiphany. In our lectionary, we are following the traditional schedule that preserves the twelve days of Christmas, and therefore sets Christmas Eve as the concluding celebration of the season of Advent.<sup>1</sup>

In importance, Christmastide is one of the two most notable seasons of the Christian year. It is dedicated to the festival of the birth of Jesus Christ and the consequent celebration of the incarnation. Since it was first celebrated, Christmas has always been a time of joy, merriment and exuberance. Its color, consequently, is white.

There is no indication that Jesus was actually born on December 25. In fact, the likelihood is that he was born in April or in May. That can be concluded on the basis that Luke’s account is built around “shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Lk. 2:8). December 25 was much too cold and inclement for sheep to be bedding down in the fields; normally, shepherds didn’t take their flocks into the field until April.

Why, then, is December 25 the traditional day for Jesus’ birth? The selection of that date represents a political and social coup on the part of the church.<sup>2</sup> The period between December 21 (the winter solstice) and December 30 was the period of greatest celebration and worship of the sun, both in the Mithraic festivals of Egypt and in Rome. This observance reached its climax on December 25, when the “birthdays” of at least five ancient gods were celebrated. In essence, Christians decided to counter this pagan festival by worshipping the birthday of their god – Jesus, and they so overwhelmed the pagan celebrations that December 25 became a major Christian holiday (“holy day”). In 336 A.D., December 25 was changed in the Roman calendar from *Natalis Solis Invicti* (“the birth of the Sun of Righteousness”) to *Natalis Christus in Betleem Judeae* (“the birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea”). Thus, the “Sun of Righteousness” was eclipsed by the “Son of Righteousness”!

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<sup>1</sup> In the medieval church, all twelve days of Christmas were celebrated as a single feast, with only work necessary to preserve life being done. The Twelve Days of Christmas are:

- Dec. 25 – Christmas Day
- 26 – St. Stephens’ Day
- 27 – St. John’s Day
- 28 – Holy Innocents Day
- 31 – Watch Night
- Jan. 1 – Jesus’ Circumcision
- 5 – Epiphany Eve

The remaining days would be feast days or, according to the calendar, the First and Second Sundays of Christmas.

<sup>2</sup> F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 277-278; George Gibson, *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 87-98.

By the latter part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the name given to December 25 was “Christ’s Mass”, stressing the idea that this was a day for consecrating the birth of Jesus in worship and in the celebration of the Eucharist. As early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Christmas music and “carols”, liturgies and customs began to be developed. The name for December 25 evolved into “Christmas” by the eleventh century.

Whereas Christmas, as a religious holy day, concentrated upon the worship of the Christ Child, much of the festivals of the formerly pagan solstice carried over into the Christian celebration of Christmas. Thus, for example, the giving of gifts was initially part of the Roman celebration of the solstice. Germany contributed the evergreen tree as a symbol of everlasting life, and its decorations come from the hanging of the body parts of conquered enemies upon these trees. The Druids gave their sacred mistletoe, under which the ill received the kiss of healing from a young virgin. The holly, representing the crown of thorns with drops of blood, came from England. The Yule log, receiving into its flames the hatreds and distrusts of the past year, came from Scandinavia, along with candles burning in the windows to light the way of the Christ child. So one can say that, whereas early Christianity succeeded at “baptizing” the pagan holidays into the worship of Christ, the pagans “re-baptized” Christmas by diverting it into play, sport and finally into commercialism.

The two major events of the Christian Year – Christmas and Easter – are the celebrations around which Christendom is centered. One marks the birth of our Lord, the other his resurrection. One celebrates the incarnation of our God upon the earth; the other celebrates our atonement and rebirth through his death and resurrection. Both celebrate the transformational love of God for humanity, as God acts to give his son for the redemption and liberation of the world.

### **Christmas Dawn, December 25** **Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Luke 2:8-20; Titus 3:4-7**

**Isaiah 62:6-12** is all about God doing a new thing. There are many metaphors used in this passage and the section of chapter 62 that precedes it to express that “new thing” – God defeating an enemy and keeping the people secure (62:6-9), the building of a new highway (vs. 10), God building a new city (vss. 11-12), the marriage of a bride and groom (vss. 4-5), the nation receiving a new name (vss. 2-4). This plethora of metaphors is all used to make one essential point: God is about to act in a thoroughly unpredictable way to accomplish for humanity (and for Israel) what only God can do.

To place this passage into context, one needs to remember that Israel had been ignominiously conquered by Babylonia in 597 BCE and her “City of God” was destroyed, its temple leveled to the ground, its people abandoned, and its leaders marched off into exile through Babylonian captivity. It seemed like the very end of Israel and of God’s experiment to build a holy people dedicated to realizing God’s shalom community upon the earth.

But now, through this prophet, God is delivering a new promise to this defeated and broken people. God will vindicate the nation, will restore its people from exile and rebuild Jerusalem

(vss. 1-2). Through giving them “a new name”, God will declare them a new creation, living an existence that was not a previous option. He, in fact, would become groom to them, an innocent bride (vss. 4-5). But God’s most far-reaching promise is reserved for the end of this chapter.

“Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind Yahweh, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth. Yahweh has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give you grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored; but those who garner it shall eat it and praise Yahweh, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts” (62:6-9).

The image is of guards standing at their post upon the battlements of a great city, sweeping the horizon for signs of a great procession coming their way. And then they see it, and raise the cry that the exiles are returning from Babylon. The gates of the city are thrown open and its people pour forth to welcome the returning former captives.

As the exiles approach their home town gates, the prophet declares two things. First, he declares that they are returning to (and will contribute toward building) a new society where wealth will be shared, justice will be accorded to all and people will truly live in healing relationship with God and each other. God’s promise given to the people is, “I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored, but those who garner it shall eat it and praise Yahweh, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts” (vss. 8-9). This sentiment reminds us of the words used just a few chapters later by Isaiah, “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat” (65:21-22). This new society that God is shaping out of exiles and the resident poor will be a sharing society in which each person will live in equity with everyone else.

Second, the prophet states that the returning exiles are welcomed with joy. Those former captives are streaming past the gates and into the city, being welcomed by the people with joyous hugs and embraces. And waiting for these returning exiles is an abundant banquet, with tables piled high with the bounty of the earth and flagons of wine full and waiting to be emptied. The exiles have returned, and a new day is dawning!

“Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. Yahweh has proclaimed to the end of the earth: ‘Say to daughter Zion, See your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.’ They shall be called, “The Holy People, the Redeemed of Yahweh”; and you shall be called “Sought out, A City Not Forsaken”” (62:10-12).

The prophet concludes this prophecy in the most unique way. The returning exiles parade triumphantly into the city. But they do not parade as conquerors of the Babylonians, for they did not conquer. Instead, they were rescued. The true conqueror, using the vehicle of Cyrus of Persia, is Yahweh. So Yahweh parades into the city as conquering king, arriving with the exiles. It is God’s arrival that brings salvation to the people and recompenses the exile for their torment. Therefore, the arriving exiles can be given the new name, “the Holy People, the Redeemed of

Yahweh”. And the welcoming people who had been abandoned by the exile of those now returning, and who had been left to their own devices, can now be named by God “Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken”. This is the new work that God has done – not only a work of release from captivity, not only the building of a new economic, political and religious society of shared resources, justice and relationship with God, but also a people re-named as those chosen and redeemed by God!

**Psalm 97** praises God for the glory of God’s reign. The psalm is divided into two sections, the first being a description of God’s reign upon the earth (97:1-9), and the second section dealing with God’s expectations for those who bear allegiance to him (97:10-12).

It begins, “Yahweh is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side. His lightnings light up the world, the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Master of the world, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory. All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him. Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments, O God. For you, O Yahweh, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods” (97:1-9).

This psalm is centered upon giving glory and praise to God’s reign upon the earth. It deals with the creative power of God at work upon the world (“his lightnings light up the world – i.e., storms and fire; “the earth sees and trembles” – i.e., earthquakes; “the mountains melt like wax” – i.e., volcanic eruptions). But it also deals with God’s work within the nation as that nation engages its political, economic and religious life (“let the coastlands be glad” – i.e., pagan nations along the coast should revere Yahweh; “righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne” – i.e., the nation and its people is judged according to whether it is acting both justly and mercifully toward the poor, powerless and marginalized; “all the peoples behold his glory” – i.e., the worship of the nations must be centered on Yahweh; “all gods bow down before him” – i.e., Israel’s commitment to Yahweh should dominate the earth). The psalm’s emphasis is on what God has done for Israel, particularly in its wilderness wanderings and in its conquering of the Promised Land. It does not mention the Torah explicitly, but its presentation of God’s expectations for Israel and for the world conform with the demands of justice and the building of public life (the economics, politics and religion of the people) that permeates Torah!

The psalm ends with an expected response from Israel for God’s choosing of that nation as God’s vehicle for the transformation of the world into God’s ideal. “Yahweh loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked. Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in Yahweh, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name” (97:10-12).

When God comes to the earth, the Psalmist is declaring in this section of Psalm 97, those who are just in their actions and committed to the realization of God’s society upon earth have nothing to fear! Instead, they have much to gain in Yahweh acting to bring God’s power and

love to the earth. Thus, it will be the humble, the poor, the minimized, the ostracized, the powerless who will most welcome his coming, for they will have the least to lose. On the other hand, those who are powerful, who rule, who shape a society will be most threatened, for both their position and their control will be at risk as God establishes his reign upon the earth. So, the Psalmist declares, God's coming will not be good news to everyone, but only to those "who hate evil". For such as these, God will "guard the lives of his faithful and rescue them from the hand of the wicked"! "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth shalom among those who God favors" (Luke 2:14)!

**Luke 2:8-20.** We are all familiar with the Christmas story, as told by Luke – perhaps, too familiar because its very familiarity lulls us to rest in its beauty while no longer hearing the shocking truth of its presentation.<sup>3</sup> We tend to hear the Christmas story within a sentimentalized understanding of the holiday that evokes warm memories of Santa Claus, White Christmases and chestnuts roasting on an open fire! What we need to rediscover, however, is that Luke's telling of the birth of Jesus is a carefully crafted story that fits like a glove the dominant theme of that Gospel – that Jesus came to proclaim and to inaugurate the Jubilee of Israel and for the world.

The primary theme of Luke is Jesus' reclaiming and acting out the Jubilee of God, and thereby bringing a great reversal to the economic, political and spiritual life of Israel and of the world. Jesus came proclaiming that God's true Jubilee was coming to both Israel and the world through his person and ministry (Luke 4:17-18).

The Jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune in which every fifty years the land of Israel was to lie fallow, all debts were to be cancelled, all slaves were to be set free and each family was to regain possession of their ancestral land (Lev. 25:8-55). When it was observed, Jubilee was designed so that wealth couldn't accumulate and power accrue in the hands of an elite few, but would rather be redistributed so that all the people of Israel would live in justice, with an equitable share of the wealth, so that poverty would be eliminated and all would live in relationship with God. It was God's way of remaking Israel into the world as God intended it to be. But Jubilee had not been observed in its entirety for at least 400 years, and Israel consequently lived in great poverty with only a select few living in wealth, power and in control of the nation's religious institution.

Thus, the primary theme of the Gospel of Luke is that Jesus has come to bring God's society back to Israel and Israel back to God. He will accomplish this by bringing about a great reversal in the economic, political and spiritual life of the nation. That great reversal would occur through Israel fully embracing the Jubilee. This reversal would be attempted through Jesus' intervention as Messiah – through his ministry, his empowering of the poor and marginalized, his confronting of the powerful representatives of the systems, their rejection of him, and his

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the commentary on Luke 2:8-20 that is given here is the same as that given on Luke 2:1-16 that appears in the Christmas Eve selections. The only difference is this commentary's last several paragraphs when I examine vs. 16-20 which are not considered in the December 24 Gospel lesson. The reason for continuing the same commentary into Christmas Dawn is that I am assuming that most churches that would publicly celebrate Christmas Eve in a nighttime service would not also celebrate Christmas Dawn; thus, such repetition increases the likelihood that this commentary on the Christmas Story will be considered.

consequent suffering, death and resurrection. If the powerful would embrace that Jubilee, then Israel would return to being God's kingdom. If they did not, then God would create a new people through Jesus that would be a Jubilee people (Acts 2:14-47). That theme is "overtured" through Luke's Christmas story.

Luke's Christmas story begins with the angel Gabriel being sent to Nazareth to tell a 14-year-old virgin that she is about to become pregnant without having had sexual intercourses with a man – and that her baby "will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David" (1:32).

This story is filled with astounding Jubilee themes of liberation. First, the angel speaks to a woman about this awesome event – not to a man. Second, she is not even a mature woman, but a mere girl – just entering adolescence and still a virgin. Third, she is given the privilege and right to refuse the angel's proposal – that is the honor bestowed upon her. But in faith believing, she accepts it. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38).

Mary sings a hymn of praise to God in her visit with her cousin Elizabeth, who is also experiencing a miracle pregnancy. We tend to read the Magnificat (1:46-55), concentrating on its opening lines because those lines center on God's graciousness in selecting Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. But note the last lines of the Magnificat:

"The Mighty One . . . has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (1:51-55).

Here is the Jubilee reversal of fortune, voiced by a pregnant peasant girl. In the birth of her son, the powerful are to be brought low, the oppressed free from tyranny, the wealthy emptied, the destitute "filled with good things". The Upside-Down Kingdom is being proclaimed through Mary's song!

The story then moves to Jesus' birth. Government tyranny forces Jesus' pregnant mother and his stepfather to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the last days of Mary's pregnancy. There, they find no room and so must bed down in a stable as Mary begins her labor. The savior of the world is wrapped in "swaddling cloths" and laid in a manger. It is a romantic picture, but it was not a romantic reality. Luke means to paint as harsh a picture as possible. It is shepherds, it is women and orphans, it is the destitute, it is the expendables, the untouchables who bed down in a stable. It is such poor people whose babies are born there and who are laid in a manger, wrapped with whatever cloth might be at hand. Jesus, the king of the world, is being born as the lowliest of peasants. The cognitive dissonance of this story must have struck the first Christians with unbelievable force.

Then comes the high point of the Christmas story. Angels appear to shepherd watching their flocks in the fields and proclaim "good news of great joy" for "born this day in the city of David is a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord". The angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven

and on earth, peace among those whom he favors!” The shepherds, obviously, leave their flocks and run to the stable to view their Messiah (Luke 2:8-16).

The two important players in this portion of Luke’s birth narrative are the shepherds and the angels. These two actors are crucial for grasping the Jubilee theme. Shepherds of Jesus’ day were considered among the expendables of society; they were located near the bottom of the power scale, ranked only above lepers. Yet it is to shepherds that the angel appears to announce the birth of the one who will turn the kingdom upside-down. They are to be understood as standing in contrast to the Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, the governor who had ordered the census. The high-and-mighty have unintentionally brought the Son of David to David’s city for his coronation (birth). But the angels are appearing to the lowest of the low, announcing to them the good news of the coming of the Messiah. Good news comes to peasants; it doesn’t come to the powerful. The words of Mary’s Magnificat, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” is being literally fulfilled through the birth of this baby!

The angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” And whom does God favor? Shepherds. A peasant mother. A carpenter father. Ox and ass, sheep and doves. The powerful are being ignored, and the lowly given access to the liberator king. And Jubilee is being literally initiated in front of our eyes!

The story now draws to its close. “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.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (2:15-20).

In ancient Israel, when a baby boy was born, the relatives and friends of the parents would gather outside the newborn’s house and sing psalms of praise to God. But Mary and Joseph had been torn away from their families because of the edict of the powerful and had been forced to travel the 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered in a Roman census. Thus, there were no relatives or friends to welcome with traditional psalms of praise the baby born to Mary. So what did God do? God provided angels both to announce the birth and to sing praise to God for the coming of this boy who would turn the world upside-down. And since relatives and friends could not gather to welcome the baby, God chose the lowest of the low, shepherds, to accompany Jesus’ birth. It was that multitude of the angels who made that hillside (and not the Jerusalem Temple) the meeting place for God and humanity, and the common response of the highest of godly beings (angels) and of the lowest and most oppressed of humans (shepherds) is the response of praise!

The praise of the angels ends. And the shepherds follow the angel’s instructions, traveling to nearby Bethlehem to visit the Christ child. There, they worship and praise him. But having had the angels’ message confirmed in their visit with the infant Jesus, what would now be the response of both shepherds and of Mary (note that Luke presents no evidence of the response of

Joseph – he is not a key player to Luke, even though that goes against all protocol in first-century Israel)?

The shepherds “found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger”, they “made known what had been told them about the child” (and likely what they had experienced in meeting him), and they “returned (to their sheep) glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen”. They found Jesus, returned to their work worshipping God, and shared what they had heard and seen. The lives of these shepherds had been profoundly impacted by their experience that night. They worshipped God in Jesus. They were excited enough about what they had seen, especially when they made the inevitable connections that any Jew contemporary with Mary and Joseph would have made about the coming of the Messiah to bring about Jubilee, that they told others about it and thus became the first evangelists in the Gospel of Luke. And the dull drudgery of their work had been transformed by this visit to a stable, so that even that work was filled with worship.

The normative word used by Luke for the response of the shepherds to this revelation was “amazed”. They were amazed, and all who heard about it were amazed! But what did Luke mean by the use of that word?

Luke uses the words “amazed” or “amazement” throughout his Gospel (e.g., 1:21, 63-66; 2:33; 4:22; 8:25; 9:43; 11:14; 24:12, 41). It is the way that the people – and especially the peasants – responded either to Jesus or to God’s action (as in this story). It is a response of awe at the unanticipated actions of God or of Jesus. But it is not to be equated with faith. One can be “amazed” without “believing”. Thus, the crowds who heard the shepherds and perhaps even the shepherds themselves responded to God’s actions through the angels and at the manger with an awe and wonder that could manifest itself in both thanking and praising God. But that should not be read as meaning that people either understood the extraordinary action that God was doing that night nor the people’s willingness to unquestioningly embrace that action to transform the people and systems of Israel and of the world.

Mary’s response was profoundly different. Luke tells us that “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart”. There are those experiences in life so profound that one must both sit in awe before them and allow the implications of that action to slowly permeate one’s consciousness and even one’s spirituality. It is a theme that Luke often visits – not just with Jesus’ mother but with Jesus himself who not only must go off into the desert to reflect upon his call (4:1-13) and often for prayer (19:41-44; 22:39-46), and is reflected in another Mary, who chooses “the better part” of sitting in silence at the feet of Jesus and learning from him, rather than helping to fix a meal (10:38-42). It is the recognition that no depth of faith comes quickly but silently, in the stilling of the heart, and in being open and receptive to the amazing ways that God is at work in the world and through one joining in God’s transformation of the world.

**Titus 3:4-7** is the Epistle lesson for Christmas Dawn. It reads, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our



Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”

Although this passage in no way alludes to the dominant theme of Christmas Dawn (Jesus Christ is born), this epistle lesson richly deserves to be a part of the Christmas lectionary. It reminds us of two realities. The first is its extremely explicit statement about the strategic role of the Holy Spirit. The angel had announced to the shepherds, “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” (Luke 2:10-11). The Savior. The Messiah (or anointed one). The Lord. But how do we know that this little baby is Savior, Messiah, Lord? And how do we make his saviorship (in the Bible, an economic term), Messiahship (a political term) and Lordship (an all-encompassing, spiritual term) alive in our economic, political and spiritual realities? We experience in our own lives and in our society the miracle of that Christmas dawn only through the power of the Holy Spirit! “When God our Savior appeared, he saved us according to his mercy through the Holy Spirit”. It is the Holy Spirit who irresistibly woos us to Christ, the Holy Spirit who places Jesus’ call before us, the Spirit who does the miracle of transformation in us (justification), and the Spirit who dedicates us to living our lives working for Christ and His Kingdom! The work of the Holy Spirit is inextricably bound up in the work of God the Father and God the Son as symbolized in that first Christmas dawn. And that work continues to go on today – both in us and through us as we act out our faith by working for the transformation of the world into the world as God intended it to be.

The second important element in this passage is the effect that the Spirit’s work has in and through us. First, it brings forth in those of us who respond positively to the gospel a forgiveness of our past sins. Immediately before today’s Epistle lesson, Paul wrote, “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us” (vss. 3-5a)! Our transformation into “Christ-ones” was all God’s work, not ours. If truth be told, we were the most miserable of sinners – as Paul suggests in his list, not very attractive people! But God chose to act on our behalf. God chose the birthing of a baby. God intended it to be “good news of great joy to all the people”. God brought about the coming of “a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord”. Thus, God acted and keeps on acting to bring about the forgiveness of our sins – both our personal sins and the corporate sins of our people, this nation. And that forgiveness is made real to us through the Spirit who woos us to Christ, who calls us to confess our sins, and who grants us both personal and corporate absolution – over and over again!

The second effect is the continuing transformation of our present life. Each of us who have experienced the gift of God’s redemptive love find ourselves always being renewed. God is continually at work within us so that we become increasingly like the Christ we embrace as Lord and Savior. And the Spirit keeps on doing this work in us to better equip, encourage and motivate us to keep on working actively in the world in league with all God’s people to help work for justice, equitably distribute wealth and to build a truly relational culture. This “present tense” reality that animates today’s Epistle lesson is not caught at all in the NRSV translation (which is the text we use in all our lectionary scripture). But it is magnificently captured in Eugene Peterson’s translation when he wrote, “God’s gift has restored our relationship with him

and given us back our lives”<sup>4</sup> (vs. 6). God’s work is indeed in the present as well as in our past, as we join with the shepherds in saying, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place!”

Finally, the effect of God’s intervention into history provides us hope for what will yet be. The apostle writes in today’s Epistle lesson, “Having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (vs. 7). As that great theologian Yogi Berra once put it, “It ain’t over until the fat lady sings!” It has only just begun – our relationship with God through Christ, our experience of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, our call from God to serve Christ’s kingdom in the world, our engagement in working for the political, social, economic and spiritual transformation of the world into God’s intentions for it, and our encouragement by that same Spirit in the daily toil and turmoil that is part of such a task. It continues for the entirety of each of our lifetimes. And it continues for millennia upon millennia of lifetimes as God works through God’s people to build God’s world. It is in the light of such a promise that we can begin to truly appreciate the profundity of the angels’ chorus, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth shalom among those whom God favors” (Luke 2:14)!

Merry Christmas!

(Cycle B Christmas Dawn.doc)

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO.: Navpress, 1993), p. 533.