

Christmas 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 24, 2020

Luke 2:1-20

Hodie Christus natus est. Christ is born today.

Alleluia! Christ is born today.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Dear Friends:

2020 has not been a very good year. I've heard about Christmas ornaments that are selling out. Christmas ornaments of a trash dumpster on fire. With the year 2020 painted on the side. An ornament for your tree. Selling out.

Has it been the worst year of your life? I haven't gone out on New Year's Eve in nearly 30 years. But I want to go out this year because I want to expel the year 2020 from my life with a lot of champagne and rowdy behavior. But I can't go out. There will be no parties, no drinking, no going out after curfew. Just when you think 2020 can't get any worse. It does.

I've been looking for ways to find joy this Christmas. Digging and looking for joy. Although I think sometimes joy finds you. More than you finding it. I had a moment that made me laughing through my tears. Have you ever had that happen? You're crying tears of sadness, and yet you're laughing uncontrollably at the same time? I'd like to tell you my story.

I am very fond of the song, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." It's a very sweet song with a touch of sadness. It definitely acknowledges troubles. *From now on our troubles will be out of sight. From now on our troubles will be miles away.* During World War II, Judy Garland would sing it at the Hollywood Canteen, which served the uniformed men and women of the armed forces. And the soldiers would break into tears. Sometimes it's the soft things that pack the biggest emotional punch. So I like that song every year, but especially this year.

The song was launched by MGM and Judy Garland in the classic movie, "Meet Me in Saint Louis." And I was reading up on it, and I discovered that the original lyrics to the song were even sadder. So sad that Judy Garland refused to sing them. And the song's writer, Hugh Martin, at first told Judy to grow up and sing his lyrics anyway. She was just twenty-one at the time. But she prevailed, and he toned down the sadness of the words. And then years later, when Frank Sinatra wanted to record the song, he went back to Hugh Martin to change it yet again to remove more of the sadness.

So in the movie, it goes like this: *Someday soon we all will be together If the fates allow Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow.* But old Blue Eyes had that changed to: *Hang a shining star upon the highest bough.* Which is probably the version most of us know. But with all due respect to the Chairman of the Board— and it will be a cold day in Hades before I speak ill of Frank Sinatra— with all due respect, I think *Until then we'll have to muddle through somehow* suits the year 2020 and the Christmas of 2020.

Anyway, the part of this story that had me laughing through my tears was the part that young Judy Garland refused to sing. Which went like this: *Have yourself a merry little Christmas It may be your last.* So that was changed to *let your heart be light.* At Garland's urging. In the movie, she is singing the song to comfort her kid sister. So for her to sing, *Have yourself a merry little Christmas It may be your last.* the thought of Judy Garland singing those words to her kid sister had me doubled over in laughter and crying at the same time. Because it really *could* be your last Christmas. But it is not something you sing to a child to give them hope.

Anyway, it's a great song. Full of pathos and sadness, but also comforting, and also a bit challenging. *Have yourself a merry little Christmas now.* It can be little and still be merry. Next year will be better than this year. And this year is not like the ones of happy golden days. But despite it all, nevertheless, have yourself a merry *little* Christmas, a *little* Christmas, *now.*

It is important and useful to remember that the original Christmas was broken and wretched. It is right and salutary to remember that the original Christmas was dislocated and isolated. Believers and non-believers have grown numb to the story, a story that has been domesticated by year after year of Christmas pageants and year after year of the lovely nativity scenes that are often called creches. It is a spectacularly wretched story, meant to shock the listeners. We've turned the angels who terrified the shepherds into darling children. We've turned the shepherds—uncouth ragamuffins— into adorable pastoral figures. We've leaned up the animals and removed their stench and their mud. But one phrase still reminds us of the basic indignity and callousness shown by the world to the Prince of Peace: *"Because there was no place for them in the inn."* As much as we've prettified the rawness and roughness of the setting and the characters, that ugly detail still stands. It is the foundation of *Las Posadas*, the Mexican observance which drives home the indifference of the world, and implicitly challenges us to do better.

Martin Luther got a few things right. And he got a few things wrong. He got Christmas right. Martin Luther fundamentally understood Christmas. He wrote many things, many sermons, many writings for children, many hymns, all of them about Christmas. Luther is perpetually in awe of Christmas. That the fullness of God, the majesty of the Creator of the universe, can *fit* into such a little baby. And that the greatest gift ever given, capital-G Grace personified, can be located in such bad swaddling clothes, such rough hay, such abject poverty. Luther criticized the great works of art that show Mary on the back of a donkey. The Bible says nothing about a donkey. They were too poor, Luther insists, too poor for a donkey. Mary walked to Bethlehem in her condition. Luther marvels at the mystery of our God. That something so great and powerful could inhabit a tiny, weak, newborn. That something so significant could be missed by

the world, and be born into such wretched circumstances. Why lies he in such mean estate?, asks the great Christmas carol, “What child is this?” *Mean estate. Wretched and cruel circumstances. Why lies he in such mean estate.*

So this may be the worst year of our lives. This may be the worst Christmas of our lives. Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian who survived a Nazi concentration camp because she protected the Jews in Holland, often quoted the words of her sister: “There is no pit so deep that God’s love is not deeper still.” It’s related to psalm 139, which says, *If I ascend to heaven, you are there;*

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. There is no pit so deep that God’s love is not deeper. There is no darkness so dark that God cannot enlighten it. There is door so heavy that God cannot open it. And that’s a big part of the Christmas story. God comes to us in the bad places. No one is surprised to find God in lovely places. But the birth of Jesus is about God arriving in unlovely places.

Someday soon we all will be together If the fates allow Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow. So have yourself a merry little Christmas right now. If the Prince of Peace can be born in a messy barnyard, he can be born in our midst right now. *So have yourself a merry little Christmas right now. Amen.*