

Luke 2:1-20
Creekside COB
December 24, 2007
Christmas Eve

“Christmas Zeal”

You’ve heard it many times already, and will hear it many more times before the night is through, therefore, one more isn’t going to hurt. “Merry Christmas!” This is what I wish for you. I can underscore it and say, “I wish you a *VERY* merry Christmas.” I can emphasize its religious dimension and wish you a “... truly blessed, Merry Christmas.” With all the sincerity I have, this is what I wish for you and for me on this night. But I’m not comfortable saying it.

It’s the “wishing” part that bothers me. Wishing seems rather lame. You know how the adage goes—“If wishes were horses, then dreamers would ride.” Something more than wishing is necessary if Christmas is going to grasp us and take root in us. So tonight, I’m not “wishing” you anything. And while I’m at it, I’m taking the “merry” out of Christmas and replacing it with something more substantial—ZEAL.

People with zeal have “an intense desire for something.” So tonight, I hope for you, not wish you, a zealous, and not merely a *merry* Christmas.

My mentor was Paul Robinson. He told me about the time back in the early 1960’s when he was the guest preacher for the Chicago Sunday Evening Club. Premiere preachers from across the country were invited to speak on this weekly program that was broadcast by the public television station in Chicago. It was the Sunday before Christmas, and in the introduction to his sermon Paul wanted to say, “Christmas inspires zeal and vigor in our hearts.” That is what he *wanted* to say. What came out was, “The wonder of Christmas inspires *veal and zigor* ...”

Given the times in which we live, I'm afraid that veal and zigor may be easier to come by than zeal and vigor-- not because zeal is elusive and pays only "occasional" visits. It doesn't pick and choose whom to fill. It is not a prize that goes to those who work hardest at it, and it isn't a passion we can talk ourselves into. The reason spiritual zeal is so sparse is because we have built up defenses against it.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."
"We know that. We hear it every year." "To us a child is born; to us a son is given... his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God..." "Yeah, yeah—we know that too-- Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Tell us something we haven't heard."

Our ears are plugged with familiarity. We can't hear the music of God's word. We don't feel the zeal. So we settle instead for nostalgia with pleasant memories of Christmases past. We get sentimental about Baby Jesus, and we him asleep on the hay, forgetting that he came to turn our lives upside down.

On the other hand, we don't want be too zealous-- about anything! Who wants to be called, *overly passionate*? We hear people saying, "Don't go overboard! Don't get too worked up! Don't get carried away! Get a hold of yourself! Settle down! Be rational! Chill out! Cool it!"

Let's get something straight this Christmas. First, God is a zealous God-- zealous about justice, righteousness, and mercy, and especially about loving his wayward children. Second, when Isaiah promises an end to all war and a reign of endless peace, he doesn't say it is up to us. "The zeal of the Lord will do this," is what he says. And third, despite the mess we've made of the world, God loves us still and always will, and will not let our sin be the last word. Kathleen Norris says, "If God can do this, why not just go along with it?"

Starting tonight, why not let God be God for a change and stop being so scared? Rather than carry the weight of the world, why

not drop it and carry the yoke of Mary's boy that is easy and light?

If you've worn out the soles of your shoes from shopping and your nerves are worn to a frazzle; if you think you'll scream if you hear "The Drummer Boy" one more time; if you're sweating about how everyone in the extended family will make it through tomorrow without any fatalities; if you have had it with Christmas pageants and parties and can't wait until December 26th arrives; if tonight finds you distracted, worn out, and at your wit's end, that's good! I'm means you are empty, and when you are empty, that means there is a place for God.

I know that you know how the story goes, but instead of listening with familiar ears, let yourselves be the ones to whom the angels say, "Don't be afraid." Don't think about what to do or how to act or feel. Laugh if you want to. Cry if you need to. Raise your hands in praise if you feel led to.

But know this-- you've come to the right place tonight. Just sit still and let the zeal of the living Word of God wash over you. Sit still and be an open vessel. Like Mary, take the words in, and ponder them in your heart.

May the Word made flesh fall afresh on you, seep into you, and surround every cell of your being, and may you have a very zealous Christmas!

This meditation was inspired by an essay written by Kathleen Norris titled, "Zealous Hope" which appeared in the Christian Century.