

GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS

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Once again the Christmas season is upon us. And when we say this, so often it is with a sigh of despair instead of a sense of joy. It seems to be hard work sometimes getting ready for Christmas, because there are all those busy tasks to do. There is the preparing of Christmas lists - lists of family and friends for whom we must shop for gifts; lists of others to whom we must send Christmas greetings - decisions to make on adding to or subtracting from last year's lists - decisions to make about entertaining friends, planning parties. And do we cut our Christmas tree or buy one cut or finally opt for an artificial one? Tramping through the woods or evergreen nursery sounds like fun, but the difficulty of deciding agreeably on what the best tree is has been known to cause disharmony and sour the occasion. Then there is the decorating of the tree and the inside decorations. And what about outside lights this year. And so it goes - one can get tired out before even wrestling with the hard question of what to get the really important persons on your gift list.

All of these activities can be joys or they can appear as real chores. It all depends on the spirit in which they are done, and the reasons for which they are done. What is essential is to keep in focus, the main point about Christmas. And that is, of course, that on this day Jesus was born in Bethlehem. How sad it is to be so busy getting ready for Christmas, that we forget what it is all for. Or if we don't exactly forget, we don't take time to remember what all the frantic preparations are for. We are like that innkeeper long ago on that first Christmas who was so busy taking care of the important guests and necessary tasks that he had no room for the carpenter and his wife. And so we, we must confess, neglect to open the inns of our hearts to the One who is the whole reason for Christmas - because we are so busy with what seem to be more important guests.

There is another reason why so many find it hard work, getting ready for Christmas. And that is, that after so many centuries since the birth of the Prince of Peace, the world seems no nearer to expressing that hope of peace on Earth, good will to men. Particularly today when half a hundred of our fellow countrymen are being held hostage by a hostile nation; when we see powerful interests of international oil companies and a cartel of oil suppliers manipulating world affairs, when the old slogan of an unpopular war, "Peace with honor", seems now to be changed to "grease and dishonor", when terrorist tactics appear more successful than diplomatic understanding, - when there seems to be a genuine possibility of war - when all this faces us today, how can we really believe in the message of Christmas? No wonder it is hard for so many to work up enthusiasm for the focus of Christmas.

So perhaps, in this advent season, it would be good to remember some aspects of that first Christmas long ago. We tend to idealize the scene. We think of the beautiful carols, Phillip Brooks' "little town of Bethlehem - how still we see thee lie - above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by." "While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love." We see shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their flocks, hearing celestial music

and seeing the angel of the Lord. As a matter of fact, though, at the same time we know this was a sad and cruel time in this fringe of the Roman empire. People were abroad because they were required to enroll or register for purposes of oppressive taxation. Romans ruled with an iron hand and dealt harshly with any threat to the peace.

This is seen in the scripture reading in the picture of Herod. Herod, responsible for the peace of the empire, is disturbed when he hears of the birth of one born to be king of the Jews. He counsels with the scribes and priests to assess the situation - secretly consults with the Magi, the astrologers recently come from the East following a star, asks them concerning the time the star first appeared - it is an old belief that a new star appears when one destined to be king is born - and then sends them forth to look diligently for the child, saying "When you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also".

But the wise men were warned in a dream about Herod and departed into their own country another way. And there is a tradition of the flight into Egypt of Joseph and Mary and the child to escape Herod's plan to slay the one born to be king. Whether there really was a slaughter of the innocents or not, whether Herod actually had killed any little boys who were born at the time of the star, or not, such an action is consistent with the cruelty and severity of Rome in the treatment of some of her colonies when rebellion was feared.

As we think back on that first Christmas, then, we see that the Star of Hope that wise men followed shone against a world dark with hopelessness, cruelty, suffering and sin. Matthew carefully draws the contrast between Herod as worldly king for the empire and the Christ-child, born to be another kind of king of an empire not of this world. There is Herod on his regal throne and the baby born in a manger. There is the might of imperial power marshaled against a weak infant. There is the cruelty of one who commits infanticide against the spirit of gentleness and love that like an aura surrounds that scene at the inn. There is the craftiness of the political leader, pretending to want to worship, too, when he plans to kill - this pitted against the innocence of a babe and the guilelessness that was Jesus.

But the point of all these contrasts is to show that it is the goodness of God in Christ that survived and survives, and it is the cruel power of Herod's Rome that declined and fell to judgment in the courts of world history. As Lowell's hymn puts it, "Though the cause of evil prosper, yet tis truth alone is strong, Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadow Keeping watch above His own." The light of Christ came into the world - a world of darkness - but the darkness did not put it out.

And that is still the hope as we prepare for Christmas today. The darkness of the world's suffering, its terror, and techniques of terrorism, its exploitation, its conflict - all this darkness cannot extinguish the Star of Hope that shines at Christmas, the light of God that was in Christ, the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

This is the great promise of Christmas that we should cultivate with earnest expectation - a reaffirmation of God's promise of the victory of love over hate, peace over war, gentleness over cruelty. This is what gives the true spirit of Christmas and confidence in its message.

The wise men of old, the Magi, - interestingly enough, they were probably astrologers from ancient Persia, later identified as Zoroastrian priests, priests of the ancient Persian religion - chose to worship and defend the child and to reject the overtures of Herod. Interesting and ironic in the present context. But this is still the hope of Christmas - that ultimately the light will be chosen, that the men choose darkness because their deeds are evil, but that God draws men to redemption through showing the graciousness of His love in Christ, and by showing how evil brings the fruits of evil, destroying itself.

If we look back at that first Christmas, remember the wise men and ponder who the wise men really are, we will note the following: The wise are those who follow the Star of Hope, and are not frightened by the darkness. The wise believe in the possibility of new beginnings, and follow the light of new possibilities. The wise reject the ways of terror of Herod. The wise believe in the power of God at work in the world, in small beginnings, in the gentle virtues of peace and goodwill. The wise believe in the triumph of good over evil - the wise are those who like the Magi of old after experiencing the Christ-child, go home by another way, live by another way in the spirit of God's redemptive love.

Christ is born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem means the house or place of bread. And so Jesus of Bethlehem becomes the bread of life. Let us now in our service of communion, get ready for Christmas, by seeking His presence, His peace, His power in our lives as we join together in the Lord's Supper.