

SEEKING
Sermon for Christmas Eve—Lk 2:1-20
LPC, 12/24/14

When you think about it, Christmas Eve is a night of seeking. The familiar Gospel lesson from Luke is full of seeking, beginning even with the Emperor Augustus, who is seeking a census of his subjects for tax purposes. Augustus, or his government at least, is seeking information and revenue. We have to speculate on how successful this project was, because Luke doesn't tell us the outcome. That's not Luke's interest.

Luke quickly turns his attention from emperors and governors to the carpenter Joseph. Joseph too is in search. Joseph is seeking his way back to his hometown. In a way, Joseph's search is being replayed today all over the country, even here in Wheeling, as generations who have left their hometowns seeking their fortunes, as presumably Joseph did, return to where their roots are. Of course, today, this seasonal migration is undertaken for sentimental reasons, or for the sake of family obligations, rather than legal obligations, as Joseph's migration was. At any rate, Joseph's quest to return to his hometown was successful, up to a point. He and his betrothed arrive in Bethlehem.

Here another seeking takes place: the seeking for a place to spend the night. This quest was initially unsuccessful, as we are told there was no room at the inn. Ultimately, this particular seeking found success in a very unconventional way. The place where Mary and Joseph finally alight is a shelter for animals.

The scene now changes from the town to the countryside, where shepherds abide with their flock. Angels appear in glory with the wonderful and terrifying news that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem and can be found in a manger, of all places. This begins another search, as the shepherds take off to "see this thing that has taken place."

That wording has always struck me. The shepherds are moved not so much to see *the child*, the expected Messiah, but to see the wonderful, unexpected *thing* that God has done. This is possibly significant, and I'll return to this at the end of this sermon.

Christmas Eve is a night of seeking. It was a night of seeking for Augustus, for Joseph, for Mary, and for the shepherds. And, I daresay, it is a night of seeking for us here tonight.

A priest friend of mine agrees that Christmas is a time of seeking but contends that most people are seeking the wrong thing. He says that most people show up in church on Christmas Eve seeking to recapture something from their past. This sought-after thing is usually some kind of feeling – of security, of family, of innocence, of awe, of childish expectation for something wonderful. Oh my, yes, there is magic in the stuff of Christmas. Who wouldn't seek this magic?

My colleague maintains that in seeking Christmas magic, people too often miss the whole point of Christmas, from a Christian standpoint. And the whole point of

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Christmas, from a Christian standpoint, is that God loved human beings so much that God voluntarily took a human body, in all its frailty, susceptibility and mortality. And of course, my colleague is right. This assumption of human frailty, susceptibility and mortality is what we churchy people mean when we speak of “The Incarnation.”

If this “Incarnation” language is too abstract for you, try thinking of it this way. Remember the story of *The Prince and the Pauper*, who switched clothes to find out how the other one lived? God is switching clothes with you to find out how you live. You never have to think that nobody knows what it’s like to be you, because God does, now, having come to earth in human form, and clothed himself in your human clothes..

The other part of the Prince and Pauper story is true to some extent too. Since God has switched “clothes” with you to know what it’s like to be you, you, ultimately, can know what it’s like to live in heaven as God does.

This is the true magic of Christmas. My friend, as a priest of the church, is right to be concerned that people focus their seeking on the right thing, rather than on ephemeral things like so-called “Christmas Spirit.” But unlike my friend, I can’t be too hard on people who come to the Christmas Eve service seeking something immaterial, longing for something they may not be able to name.

Longing itself is not wrong. God placed longing in the human heart that humans might seek God. Longing is natural. Longing is human. Longing is holy. Now it is true that we humans try to fill our longing with things that are not God: material goods, or immaterial feelings. These attempts are not destined to be successful, because the only thing that fills the deepest human longing is the thing that longing was designed to fit: God. St. Augustine speaks of the “God-shaped hole” within us. The only thing that fills the God-shaped hole is God.

What did you come here tonight seeking? If it was to relive the glories of Christmas past, what is behind that? What is the longing behind the longing? In all our seeking, are we not all, ultimately, seeking love?

If that is true for you tonight, you have come to the right place. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

This is the true magic of Christmas. This is the wonderful *thing* that takes place tonight. This is the source, and the satisfaction, of all our seeking, all our longing.