

CHRISTMAS EVE, SERIES B, 2017
PRINCE OF PEACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN, POLAND
Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

(A word of welcome to all -- guests, family, friends, etc.)

Most pastors I know, including myself, struggle with their Christmas Eve sermons. We hear these familiar words from Luke, and we wonder what can we possibly say after “Christ is born?” These words are so familiar, that we fear they will become too familiar. We fear no one will listen to them anymore, unless we clergy come up with something new and exciting every Christmas Eve. Maybe that’s our egos talking.

But then it occurred to me that these words are more like comfort food. According to Wikipedia, *comfort food is food that provides a nostalgic or sentimental value to someone, and may be characterized by its high caloric nature, high carbohydrate level, or simple preparation.* We reach for these foods when we are stressed, or longing for home and family, or just in a mood.

Perhaps these words we hear on Christmas Eve, especially from the gospel of Luke, and the carols that we sing, are meant to be our spiritual comfort food. And, like comfort food, it doesn’t matter how often we hear these words, they will always mean something to us. We can feel some of the tensions of our lives melt away when we hear this good news of our savior’s birth. We can feel ourselves relax a bit when we sing the angels’ songs.

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight,” is how Phillips Brooks put it in his hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” In one of my favorite hymns, Edmund Sears wrote: “And you, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow; look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing; oh, rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!”

I don’t know about you, but after the craziness and madness we’ve observed in this past year, I’m ready for a double helping of Spiritual comfort food. No matter where you stand politically, you must admit that there have been a lot of shenanigans taking place in our government, and if that isn’t enough there’s always Hollywood. Then there’s North Korea, the Middle East, storms and fires, and, well, the list seems rather long this year.

So yes, we are yearning for spiritual comfort food.

The President of the Lutheran World Federation, Archbishop Dr Panti Filibus Musa, put it this way in his Christmas letter:

On behalf of the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, it is with exceeding joy that I bring you Christmas greetings

In spite of the enormous challenges that threaten fullness of life around the world, I chose to greet you with the words “exceeding joy” because of my Christian conviction, expressed in the words of Luke 2:13-14: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’”

Although the forces of evil seek to undermine our common humanity, God’s peace that transcends all understanding abides with us. God’s peace comforts us in times of turbulence and crisis.

We gather here this evening to be filled with our spiritual comfort food. It is good to dwell in the stable with Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus. It is good to think of a silent and holy night with all calm and bright. With our guests, our family, and our friends we come together to revel in this joyful night.

And yet, (you knew there would be an “and yet”) And yet, as we know with any comfort food, there is always a risk if we eat only comfort food. High caloric nature, high carbohydrate level, probably

high fat. Why is it that comfort food is not always the healthiest food? I mean, does anyone consider broccoli and carrots your go to food for comfort?

Likewise, if all we are fed in our faith life is spiritual comfort food, we will not be sustained for our daily lives. We will find ourselves faltering with the news of the day, or when our relationships are challenged. Along with spiritual comfort food we also need the rest of the gospel story, even the parts which aren't always comfortable or pleasing, but are necessary for living.

I like the way it's put in Titus: ¹¹*The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,* ¹²*training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly,* ¹³*while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.* ¹⁴*He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*

One person has observed that these words from Titus invite us to recommit to the tasks we have been given. Christian life is a discipline that requires a commitment of the heart and demands that we seek ways to improve the world as Jesus did.

This is part of the Christmas story. God has entered into our lives not just spiritually, but in the flesh, so that we might be redeemed and purified. While we feast upon the spiritual comfort food that is around us this night, we also are being prepared for the work ahead of us. As it turns out, this spiritual comfort food is full of what we need to sustain us for the living of these days.

Luke Wadding, who died in 1686 put it this way:

- 1 On Christmas night all Christians sing
to hear the news the angels bring:
news of great joy, news of great mirth,
news of our merciful king's birth.
- 2 Then why should we on earth be sad,
since our redeemer made us glad,
when from our sin he set us free,
all for to gain our liberty?
- 3 When sin departs before his face,
then life and health come in its place.
Angels rejoice with us and sing,
all for to see the newborn king.
- 4 All out of darkness we have light,
which made the angels sing this night:
"Glory to God in highest heav'n;
peace on earth, and goodwill. Amen."

On this joyful Christmas Eve, may we be blessed with all the spiritual comfort food we need, so that we are sustained in life and all which we face, with the presence of Christ our savior. Amen.