

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
December 24, 2012; Christmas Eve Candlelight (11pm) Service
“A Cold Christmas”
Luke 2:1-7 | *Read the scripture online* <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=224580826>

Listen to these song lyrics and then tell me what comes next: *The sun is shining, the grass is green; the orange and palm trees sway. There's never been such a day in Beverly Hills, L.A. But it's December the twenty-fourth, and I'm longing to be up North... I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know.* Irving Berlin was supposedly in a California hotel in 1940 when he got the idea for the song “White Christmas.” The following year it was first performed by Bing Crosby for a Christmas Day radio broadcast and went on to become one of the most influential songs of the past century. Christmases are supposed to be “white Christmases,” but this expectation is much older than Irving Berlin and Bing Crosby. Sixty years before White Christmas, Christina Rossetti wrote about Christ’s birth this way: *“In the bleak mid-winter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.”* And 250 years before that, Michael Praetorius wrote: *“Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung, ... it came a floweret bright amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night.”*

The combination of celebrating Christ’s birth on December 25th and having the bulk of the early Christian communities in the northern hemisphere are what laid the foundation for wintry Christmas festivities. It makes for very picturesque Christmas cards. And it makes the details of the first Christmas more poignant, imagining a cruel, winter’s wind howling through the streets of Bethlehem, while an uncomfortably pregnant Mary and an anxious Joseph find themselves out of luck regarding late-night housing on Christmas Eve. However, this causes a dilemma for preachers, because our seminary professors carefully taught us that Israel is in a temperate region just off the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It is about the same latitude as Florida or central Texas and averages 300 days of sunshine per year. Sure, it will have winter weather and it can be blustery in Bethlehem, but typically December 25 is mild and in the 50s...not exactly weather destined for a snow globe, or a frosted Hallmark Christmas card.

In an odd sort of way, though, we take it as a point of pride to imagine Christmas being the coldest day of the year, so that our insistence of holding celebrations that day looks all the more noble and praiseworthy. We all turn into Garrison Keillor, with our news from Lake Wobegon about Minnesota winters, leaning into the wind as sheets of snow swirl up in our faces. As Keillor has said, cold weather takes the place of personal guilt. Maybe you haven’t been the shining star you should have been, but when it’s this cold outside, now is not the time to worry about it. Our worldly expectations of a wintry Christmas then get carried over into our Christmas Eve church services. The poet said: *The darkest midnight in December, no snow nor hail nor winter's storm/ shall hinder us for to remember the Babe that on this night was born.* We pile up winter metaphors for Christmas in church like logs stacked beside the fireplace: bleak mid-winters, snow-covered Tannebaums, silent nights, holy nights, angels saying “Nowell” to shepherds in fields where they lay keeping their sheep on a cold winter’s night that was so deep.



Is all this bad? Is it disingenuous? No. I like the Northern hemisphere version of a cold, wintry Christmas. Think about it. In hot weather, people spread out from one another. We keep our distance; we look for a patch of shade. In cold weather, we come together; we huddle around a fire, share body heat, and try to stay warm. We do random acts of kindness: push a car stuck in the snow; hold open doors for people with their arms full of packages. Something about the shared discomfort of cold weather reminds us that we're all in this together.

Imagining the first Christmas taking place during winter weather also helps us see the real power of this story. Consider the details from the beginning of Luke 2 without any other background information about the divine nature of Mary's child. We're first told about a harsh action by the Roman government, enrolling all the population so they would know who to tax and who to draft into the army. Next, to obey this requirement meant you had to leave home and travel to the city of your birth, which for Joseph meant a long journey south to Bethlehem. Third, this bureaucratic mess couldn't have come at a worse time, for Joseph's betrothed was expecting her first child any day. And, of course, Mary goes into labor when Bethlehem is packed with out-of-town travelers and there are no reasonable lodgings available. They don't have a lot of money; they don't have many options; and they're far away from their normal support network of Nazareth family and friends. It is a harsh series of events fitting to remember against a backdrop of harsh winter weather.

When considered in this light, the details of the Bethlehem journey have lots of overtones with people today. How many today are frustrated by government regulations, paperwork, and forms required in order to qualify for food stamps, supplemental income, child support? How much traveling must be done to take care of this bureaucracy: time lost from work, bus transfers, waiting in lines that never seem to get shorter? What if the issue isn't child-birth but medical care, doctor's visits, trips to the ER? How do you get through these scenarios without help from others? Like Joseph and Mary, we are all struggling to navigate our Bethlehem journeys. And when we can huddle together for warmth and support, when we can come together to help, to be an advocate, to watch a child or be a friend to someone trying the best he or she can, then the journey leads to a place of light, of hope, and God's loving plan for this wintry world.

We remember how there was no room in the inn for Mary and Joseph. But there was a manger and a stable; and soon thereafter shepherds and magi and other guests. They got by because the child was born into a family that was part of a community; something that comes together, like folks huddled around a fire on a wintry night; and who find time around that fire to tell stories, to laugh, to admire the sparks that fly high and join the stars overhead, and remember that we can get through this—if we do it together.

God came to us so we could remember to come together as God's family, to care for this newborn child: to tell stories, laugh, and remember how winter never lasts forever.

AMEN

