

December 24, 2021 | Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

TEXT: [Luke 2:1–7](#), [Isaiah 9:2–7](#)

TITLE: A Child Born For Us

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

This Christmas Eve service really doesn't change much from year to year. We light candles; we hear about Mary and Joseph and Bethlehem; we sing "Silent Night, Holy Night." Yet even though all these things are quite familiar, there are still moments that surprise us, words that trip us up. I was re-reading for the hundredth time the words from the prophet Isaiah when I stumbled over the phrase "a child has been born for us." Born for us. The preposition seems wrong. I've never seen that language on a birth announcement—"The Smiths are pleased to announce a baby born for them." They might say "a baby born to them" or "a baby has come into our family." And if you know the mother well and she tells you about what it felt like to deliver a 9 lb. child with an uncomfortably large head, you'll hear a description of a "baby born from her." But being born for someone? That's something else altogether.

Diane Komp is a pediatrician and an author. She has noted that parenthood is about getting attached to the one she describes as the "little stranger." She uses that description intentionally because she knows that babies do not extend the familiar, but instead push the parents into what is novel and strange. I remember well the feeling of pulling away from the hospital that first time with a newborn in the car seat in back and thinking, "Wait—you actually think we can take care of this tiny creature?" I remember learning that parts of the umbilical cord came home still attached to the baby and only later fell off. Who knew that belly buttons weren't standard equipment?! I naively thought changing diapers was a slightly distasteful ritual of gently cleaning off a baby's cute, round, um, cheeks. Who knew that some days you would be changing diapers, onesies, shirts, socks, and most everything in a 15-foot radius?!

Babies are born to us. They are thrust upon us after emerging from us and become a part of us and our every waking hour. That is why we so strongly identify with the Christmas story in Luke's gospel. For all the exotic details about ancient decrees, Augustus and Quirinius, and trips from Nazareth to Bethlehem, in the end it comes down to its succinct summary of childbirth—And lo, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. The next verse dispassionately notes "Mary gave birth to her firstborn" but everyone

can fill in the gaps with what was involved in that event. There were birth pains, befuddlement, a progression that felt both inevitable and lasting way-too-long. It was messy and awkward and frightening and wonderful all at once. And so, the preposition used in Luke's story makes perfect sense: Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger.

But onto the Christmas stage stomps the old prophet Isaiah, taking the spotlight away from Mary and shining it into our eyes. "You people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...A child who'll be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." And then comes Isaiah's birth announcement with a different preposition: "This child has been born for us." Frankly, that statement feels more appropriate for Christmas gift exchanges than it does when speaking about a baby. It's as if we are by a Christmas tree surrounded by a mound of brightly-wrapped packages. Someone bends down, reads a label on top, and extends toward us a gift saying "This is for you." To which we often say, "For me? This is for me?" With some surprise and expectancy, we take the gift and say "thank you." The truth is: Receiving a gift changes us. Gifts remind us that we are loved, that we are connected to others who care for us, and that we are worthy of affection. Gifts evoke something from us. They pull us forward into a better place. They make us more than we were before. That's why Isaiah chose the preposition he did.

I read about a writer who attended a church service in which a friend was preaching—a friend who was an Ojibwe Native American preaching to a congregation of indigenous Native Americans. His text was the angel's annunciation to the young girl Mary telling her she would give birth to the Christ child. Typically preachers focus on how strange this must have been for Mary—an innocent young girl interrupted by an angel visitor with a strange message and a heavy burden now placed on her shoulders. But this preacher didn't approach the Annunciation that way at all. He said, "Notice that the first thing Gabriel does when he encounters Mary is to give her a new name: 'Most favored one.' It's a naming ceremony." With that, he used language that immediately connected with his congregation.¹ Mary received a new name. The Annunciation was not about something happening to her, but something for her and for all of us, a gift that transformed her life, evoking something long awaited into lived reality.

That's why the prophet Isaiah was right. This child Jesus was born for us. For you and for me. A gift—a challenge—an opportunity—something

surprising and undeserved, yet done from love for us and for all the world. Like we heard in the quotes earlier: This birth wasn't picture-perfect. It was messy because our lives are messy and God knows that to be true. This birth isn't something we passively observe from afar. No, we are part of this drama—and God fully intends us to be changed by what we see and by what occurred for us. You can walk away from Christmas if you want. You can put away the decorations. Scroll through YouTube or TikTok or your work emails. But this Christmas baby isn't going away. The child born in Bethlehem—Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace – doesn't disappear just because we turn our eyes away. The child—the man—the crucified rabbi—the risen Lord—was born for us.

The preacher Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Bethlehem is not the end of the journey but only the beginning; it's not home but rather the place through which we must pass if ever we are to reach home at last.”² Every year we tell this same story—of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. But it is so much more than a story. It is a gift for us. It is a naming ceremony for us. It is the place we have to go through in order to reach home at last. Yes, it's incredibly familiar but it is true nonetheless. All this happened for you—for us—for now and for tomorrow. It changes us in a good way. Bethlehem is the beginning of our journey home for all of us.

Thanks be to God! Let us pray.

¹ Kathleen Norris, [Amazing Grace](#), 1998, p. 73.

² Frederick Buechner, [The Magnificent Defeat](#), p. 56.