

Good morning, friends and Merry Christmas!

Finally, it's here. The day of days when we celebrate Christ's coming into the world. Brothers, sisters and siblings all around our Pennsylvania Southeast Conference, our state and nation, along with Christians the world over rejoice in the arrival of the one called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Martin Luther said that when God wanted to address humankind, God did so in baby talk (see Placher, p. 52). Luther said, "Look upon baby Jesus. All subsequent chatter of learned theologians is but a series of footnotes on the primal baby talk" (William Willimon, *On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, p. 29).

The great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth said that when we think about God, "we think of the highest, the absolute, the ultimate, some mysterious abstraction. But the God remembered at Christmas is a God with a name, a God with a human face"

Why would God choose to do such a thing, come into human history in the birth of a child? The answer is love, of course. When God wanted to tell us how dearly and unconditionally we are loved, God did it in the simplest, clearest, most eloquent way possible, a way no one could miss or misunderstand—through the birth of a baby. When God wanted to touch our hearts and call gratitude and love out of us, God chose the birth of a child.

His mother, Mary, and father, Joseph, set out from Nazareth on the long trek south, to Jerusalem and beyond, to Bethlehem, town of Joseph's birth. She was heavily pregnant. When finally they arrived, every available place was taken: there was no room in the inn. Instead

they settled for the night in the stable out back. During that long night, her labor began, and the child, a son, was born. They wrapped him in the strips of cloth, and after they each cradled him and she nursed him, they placed him in the cow's feed box, the manger.

And that, Christians believe, is the way God comes among us: in the birth of a child, in the way every one of us was born, in the incredible miracle of human life, in the love of a mother and father, a family, a community. God put on flesh that we might put on God.

And in that flesh, there is work to do: The late Howard Thurman, African American scholar, minister, and poet, called it the “Work of Christmas”:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers and sisters,
To make music in the heart.

When the child was born in Bethlehem, a light appeared in human history. As the prophet put it, “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.”

We know what that means—to sit in darkness: to hear every day of the latest disease and potential pandemic, to see war and hear rumors of war, to fear for our economy that teeters on the brink, all amid political rhetoric that divides the many for the gain of a few. And every one of us is familiar with the darkness of own personal loss and grief: the loss of a parent, a child, a beloved companion, a colleague and dear friend.

The religion of Christmas is that Christmas faith does not deny the darkness but chooses not to live in it.

And so, whatever darkness lurks in the background of your Christmas morning, please know that there is light: a small, fragile light to be sure, but light that will not be overcome—ever; light that will dispel darkness, like the light of the small candles we held last night and the one I am holding now; the light of the love of God, the light of the world.

Long ago,
In the dark night, in a stable behind a crowded inn, a child was born.
In him was life—
And that life was, and is, the light of all people.

Merry Christmas, my friends. May God bless you and the people we love today and in the coming New Year.

Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' 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!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.