

“Experiencing a Sacred Christmas: Encountering” by Rev. Dr. Peter Thompson

Matthew 3:1-12

Romans 15:4-13

Christmas is not just another season or holiday. Christmas is sacred. And the story behind why Christmas is sacred is not just any story. If it had been, it would not have become known as the greatest story ever told. Today, on this second Sunday in Advent, we are invited to not only think of Christmas and the story behind it, but we are also invited to encounter Christmas. It is one thing to hear a story and it is a whole other thing to encounter and be a part of the story.

Last week we were reminded of our call to prepare for the coming light of Christ. The text we read in Matthew 3 a moment ago about John the Baptist reiterates this call. Perhaps the most important element of our call to prepare for Christ during this Advent season is the active waiting required. It is necessary for us to realize our waiting is not passive or complacent or boring. There are things that need to be done and our waiting for Christ calls for our participation. John’s call for the people to repent and believe in the good news is a necessary part of our preparation to be face to face with God. We must prepare our hearts indeed. As we discussed last week, our call to prepare may also include our effort to see differently, imagine more openly, and dream more faithfully, as we focus on Christ, who is the light of the world. To do this requires a different way of thinking, understanding that preparing is not planning, for it is God who has plans for us; plans for a future with hope and plans to prosper. Our role is not to tell God our plans but get on board with God’s plans by being as prepared as possible. As Kathy Anderson shared with me last week, to do this we had better bend our knees and get ready. If not, we may get knocked or run over.

Our focus today during the rest of our worship together is to continue preparing for Christ by encountering elements of the Christmas story as it pertains to real life and real circumstances today. What Mary and Joseph went through during the time of Jesus’ birth was no small feat. There was judgment and criticism and violence and government rulings and jealousy and fear and travel and prayer. There were angels with messages of hope and wisdom and honorable gifts brought by honorable travelers. There was denial out of obligation and exhaustion and there was hospitality given by humble measures. There were servant leaders and shepherds. There was a need for refuge and healing and belonging and hope and joy and love and there were gifts of the same in response.

In just a few moments we are going to be invited to the Lord’s table to receive God’s gifts to us of the bread of life and cup of salvation: an encounter of its own power and transformation filled with strength and nourishment needed for our spiritual journeys. As we come forward to receive the elements of communion this morning, you are invited to bring your tithes and offerings to God and God’s church and place them in the offering plate. Your offerings are a sign and reflection of your gratitude to God for the many blessings God has given you. Along with the offering plates, a prepackaged communion set will be available to you to pick up. You

are invited to then return to your seat along the side aisle to partake of the elements there. After everyone has been served, we will offer a prayer for communion and then all be invited to proceed to one of the 5 self-guided stations to encounter. We will not be formally concluding our worship this morning, as our invitation to experience a sacred Christmas by encountering urges an ongoing participation even as we leave this place. If you are worshipping with us on the radio or video streaming and wondering what it is you can do, I will get to that in just a moment.

Experiencing a Sacred Christmas today includes five self-guided stations to engage at your own pace. You may participate in them all, remain in one, or select a few. There is no order in which you must follow. The self-guided stations are as follows: *(a list in the bulletin as well)*

- Interactive Prayers of Compassion and Gratitude for our community, our country, and the world. This will take place here in the front of the Sanctuary using these two white boards and resources. Prayers of Compassion include lament, intercession- like a wailing wall of sorts. Prayers of Gratitude include praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. These are not prayers for us, but prayers for our community, our country, and the world.
- Alternative Giving is available in the rear of the Sanctuary. At this station you can learn the impact of the dollar! You will learn about and be invited to participate engage in Alternative Giving with four of our ministry partners (Jubilee Youth Development Center, Lynchburg Daily Bread, Sports Outreach, and Malawi Secondary School). Today is not the only time this alternative giving option will be available. It will remain available during the week and throughout the rest of Advent.
- Pack food! Assist the Parkview Community Mission by packing a meal bag for the Food for Thought program. Our goal today is to pack 100 bags. If each of us pack one bag, we will easily cover this goal. This encounter can be experienced in the Narthex.
- Christmas Journey! Encounter a lesser-known part of the Christmas story and how it is represented all around the world. This encounter begins in the atrium across from the columbarium and continues as a walk through the hallways using bulletin boards as guides and interactive tools.
- Personal Prayer! This season is not always easy or joyful for all of us. As days get shorter, nights get longer, and our memories continue to hold on to those we love and miss so dearly during the holidays, personal prayers of wholeness and healing may be just what is needed most. This encounter is available in the Chapel. Hold on to a prayer square, light a candle, ask God for healing and wellbeing, receive an anointing of oil or laying on of hands.

If you are worshipping with us on the radio or video streaming, you too are invited to experience a sacred Christmas through encountering this morning. For the radio listeners, music will be offered as a reflection of the season and the power of its meaning. The music will last until the end of our live broadcast. For video streamers, the video will remain on and fixed to the chancel area where the Interactive Prayers of compassion and gratitude for others in our community, our country, and throughout the world will be taking place. You are encouraged to spend time in prayer and reflection during this time. You may offer prayers of compassion (lament, intercession, wailing) or gratitude (adoration, thanksgiving, praise). You may also choose to enter a time of personal prayer for wholeness and healing. You may also take this time to consider alternative giving or respond to God's invitation to partner with you through financial giving. You may make contributions effectively through our online giving platform.

If you have children, we welcome your interaction and experience with them as a family at each of the stations. If you need assistance, please ask me, Alex, Marcia, or a friend nearby and together we will find a way to make it happen.

I know this is different. I know this seems like a lot. You don't have to do everything. This is not meant to be an all-day affair, but an invitation for you to encounter the Christmas Story in a different way over the next 30-45 minutes. I want to encourage us to not anticipate but participate. Allow yourself to encounter and see what God has in store for your encounter. There is nothing to fear, only hope, peace, love, and joy, to be experienced. The coming of Jesus was (and still is today) revolutionary and it invites everyone to prepare and get ready for the greatest encounter of our lives- God Incarnate- Emmanuel- God with us.

To Experience a Sacred Christmas this morning, we begin at the table, with an invitation from Christ for our eyes to be opened and our lives to be transformed through the gifts of the bread of life and cup of salvation. It is said when Christ was at table with them and they ate of the bread, their eyes were opened. May it be so for us today. May our eyes be opened to see differently, imagine more openly, and dream more faithfully as we prepare for the light of Christ to guide us and direct us. This is the Lord's table, and the Lord invites all those who trust and believe in him to come and be fed. Whether you have been to this table often or it has been a long time, whether you have been faithful to God or fallen short, whether you are spiritually mature or a newcomer to Christ, whether you are 6 or 60, all those who depend on and celebrate God's unconditional love are welcome at the Lord's table. Let us pray together... **Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts, to us be blessed.** And now let us join together in praying the Lord's prayer... **Our Father...**

Words of Institution and reminder of instructions to receive

Prayer after Communion and invitation to go to stations...