

Christmas Message

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A Service of Lessons and Carols
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It will come as no surprise to most of you to hear that a service of lessons and carols is one of my favorite services of the entire church year.

In the first place, there's lots of congregational singing, and I love to hear all of you sing.

In the second place, there are lots of readings from the Bible, and I love to hear the Bible read out loud in church, especially if it's read well.

In the third place, there is, for most of us, a deep affection for a service of lessons and carols, derived from the mother of all such services, held in and broadcast from the chapel of King's College, Cambridge.

In the fourth place, this service as a greater-than-usual number of participants, and I welcome the chance to get more of you out there in Pewville participating in the leadership of worship.

And finally, in the fifth place, there is no expectation your part of a significant sermon from me. You don't need it, you don't want it, and the occasion doesn't call for it. The occasion calls for lessons and carols – we had five of the former and seven of the latter – and those lessons and those carols carry the burden of the day. For a long-winded preacher to attempt to elaborate, explicate, or perorate at a service like this is gild the lily, or, as Shakespeare actually put it in *The Life and Death of King John*, "To gild refined gold, to paint the lily, to throw a perfume on the violet, to smooth the ice, or add another hue unto the rainbow, or with taper-light to seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish, is wasteful and ridiculous excess."

Well, I hope this Christmas message isn't quite as bad as all that, but Christmas is what it is, for better and for worse, and little I can say will make it any better or any worse. Christmas is ripe with traditions, groaning with excess, and stubbornly resistant to the purifying tendencies of latter-day Puritans like me.

The lessons and the carols, as well as the candles and the wreaths, the banners and the creche, the twinkling lights and the greenery swags all remind us that Christmas is a beloved jumble that only pointy-headed academics or scroogy pastors would attempt to sort out.

Yes, there is considerable harm in our allowing our cultural disease of affluenza to run riot through the season, and that's the sort of misunderstanding every Christian idea and action is prey to, and all of us who take Christianity seriously know that our faith comes with risks.

And so the question always becomes, "Is it worth the risk?" whatever "it" is. And I suspect that this would have been the sort of question God put to that multitude of the heavenly host on the eve of that first Christmas: "Is it worth the risk?"

Is trying to save people from their own self-destructiveness worth the risk of living as one of them?

Is a helpless baby, conceived and born under less-than-ideal circumstances, too

fragile an instrument for the task?

Are the normal vagaries of historical existence too chaotic for any except the most penetrating seer to spot a divine hand and divine plan at work?

The yearning of all people of goodwill, at Christmas and all other times, is for God to enter our existence in such a way that tragedies such as the Sandy Hook school shooting are no more.

But a baby is no defense against a spray of bullets, which proves that god's way are not our ways. We call for more guns, more guards, more security, more laws.

God us for more vulnerability. God alls us to the side of the manger where Love Incarnate sleeps, vulnerable to all the world's harms. That's God's way of doing things.

A baby may not be much of a defense against the world's madness and suffering, but a baby, rightly grown up transparent to the Holy, makes a terrific offense. That baby of Bethlehem, and the person he grew up to be, changed, inspired, and revolutionized the world, and only the prophets saw him coming.

My Christmas prayer for all us, dear Christian friends, is that when we look into the manger, we see not simply vulnerability and risk, but God seeking in holy love "to save all people from aimlessness and sin." If that's what you see when you look in, you'll have a blessed Christmas indeed.