

The Place Christ Finds Luke 2:1-20

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And she . . . laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Lk. 2:7

My assumption this evening is that nearly everyone here accepts Christ and the church's teachings about him as the Son of God, Savior, and Friend. The question is, has any of this a chance today in the world we know and live in?

In today's political turmoil

Has Christ a chance to make an ounce of difference in today's world of political turmoil? We have seen public protests on grand scale this year. Many of us have not seen anything like it since sometime in the 1960s. The protests have been widespread, taking place in Egypt, in Libya, on Wall Street, in California, Ohio, and right here in Madison. A case could be made that some portion of these protests had their start here, in and around our State Capitol. Wherever they started, a sure indicator of the mood today is that *Time* magazine named "The Protester" as its Person of the Year for 2011.¹ So we are in a situation in which topsy has become turvy, and where people are hitting the streets, voicing opinions, demanding to be heard, questioning authority, and advocating for change from top to bottom.

Has Jesus a chance at all to make a difference in this time of turmoil and upheaval? Look at the record. The emperor had the whole empire on the move around the time Jesus was born. Lives and livelihoods were put on hold while families traveled to the hometown of the head of their household. It mattered not what their own personal needs were; they had to crisscross the land and had to march to wherever the emperor wanted them to go. In the full flood of that busy time, Christ was born. He found a place to fit in.

Later on, another emperor over the same region declared Christianity illegal. Believers had to be clandestine. Those who were not were punished, some with imprisonment and some with death. The apostle Paul closed one of his letters by writing, "All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household" (Phil. 4:22). The emperor did not want to make any room for Christianity whatsoever, but Jesus found a place right in the emperor's household nonetheless.

Closer to our own time, one who served as a chaplain during World War I tells of asking the men near the front line of battle what he should preach on. What topic did those men in harm's way want to hear about the most? "Tell us something about Jesus Christ," they said.² One would think it would be hard to find a place for anything but fear and death at the front, but Christ found a place there.

On and on the record reads of the place Christ has found and still finds in the midst of political turmoil and upheaval. Even right here in our situation it is the case. Last spring or whenever it was things were heating up against the current governor, I was part of an interfaith contingent that was led into the Capitol building. There were drums beating. There were people chanting. There were signs of protest held high. People filled the Capitol building, every floor of it beneath the rotunda. It was crowded and it was loud. But, when our group of interfaith clergy was introduced, the whole place quieted and joined in a responsive prayer.

Never doubt if Christ can find a place when all is in turmoil and upheaval. The record is that he has always found a place there before, and he shall be able to again, even now.

In families with deep troubles

But what about in families? Has Christ a chance to make an ounce of difference today for families beset by troubles by the number? The strain is certainly there. The strain on the economy is felt in the home before it takes to the streets in public protest, isn't it? A pastor of my acquaintance sees a correlation in her community between the plummeting economy and the increased presence of tension in her families. Where she lives, that tension seems to coincide with a rise in instances of alcohol abuse.

Even in good times, family relationships can be fragile. At a meeting not at all church-related, the leader asked about family relationships, especially at the holidays, and she just about lost control of the meeting. People started complaining about in-laws, parents, siblings, and even spouses. Has Jesus a chance to make a difference in this tension-filled atmosphere of family strife?

Again, look at the record. Begin with the family Jesus was born into. The relationships that existed within the Holy Family, both the immediate family and the extended family, do not appear to have been serene or secure. Joseph was just about ready to divorce Mary. Mary's parents seem to be surprisingly absent, given that Mary was apparently quite young. At any rate, she does not go to her mother or her father, but to a distant and

older cousin who has problems of her own, including an embarrassingly late pregnancy and a husband who has had some kind of apparent stroke. But it was to this family that Christ was pleased to be born.

Laura Hillenbrand's book *Unbroken* tells of a former World War II POW who was haunted by nightmares of the terrible abuse he received from his captors. He turned to alcohol, but that came to overpower his life. It did not keep the captors out of his nightmares, where merciless beatings were relived. In one nightmare, he was fighting back. But he woke to find himself astride his wife with a chokehold on her and she was gasping for her breath. All that stopped – the alcohol abuse, the nightmares, the deterioration of his marriage – it all stopped when he found the peace of Christ at a Billy Graham crusade.³

Never doubt that Jesus can make his way into the fiercest of family situations. He was born to be there, and he knows how to make his way into homes like that to bring both blessing and peace.

In an age with no time for him

So Jesus can find his way into turbulent times and turbulent families, but what about such an age as this, when so few think of him? Has Christ a chance to make an ounce of difference today in an age that seems to have no time for him?

An old saint of the church used to say that the real problem with the church is not atheism without but reduced Christianity within.⁴ This is not a new problem by any means. John Calvin complained of it. He complained of religious leaders who were “mere ghosts of pastors” and who let faith and spiritual practices dwindle and die until they were replaced by bankrupt ideas and empty rituals.⁵

Today we might find that the creed is unknown, that the historic values of the denomination are forgotten, and that prayer, deep and regular, is neglected, that the knowledge of scripture is dismally low, and that worship is more about the people gathered below than the glory of the God who reigns above. Has Jesus any chance at all when even his church seems to do everything except to rally around him?

Once more, look at the record. The age into which Jesus was born had been expecting the Messiah for centuries. When he came, he was unnoticed at first, then rejected, and then ultimately crucified. But he rose from the dead to reach all the ages.

As for the history of the church, one who has studied it carefully observes, 'The supreme wonder of the history of the Christian Church is that always in the moments when it has seemed most dead, out of its own body there has sprung up new life.'⁶ So it is that the Master finds room.

You believe in Jesus, but has he chance to make a difference in the world you know? He has found his way before into political turmoil, family upheaval, and reduced religion. Has he chance to do that today? Much of it can depend upon you and the place you make for him. Don't let this moment pass. He is near to you now. Give him a chance. He will find a place and build his kingdom with you.

¹ Kurt Andersen, "The Protester," www.time.com, December 14, 2011. Accessed December 15, 2011.

² Arthur J. Gossip, *In Christ's Stead* (1968, rpt.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1925), p. 148.

³ Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 366-376.

⁴ James S. Stewart, *A Faith to Proclaim* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 31.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.iv.7, p. 631.

⁶William Temple, in Elton Trueblood, *While it is Day* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 104.