

# Christmas is good news, isn't it?

## A sermon

Dan Epp-Tiessen

**C**hristmas is good news, isn't it?

Christmas 1994 was the most painful Christmas season of my life. That year as December 25 approached, Esther and I found our pain and sorrow growing deeper and deeper. Almost every evening that December, after we got our two young boys in bed, we would collapse wearily on the living-room couch. We would light a candle to remember Tim, and then we would weep, tears flowing freely down our cheeks. An hour or so later, when we were even more exhausted, we would climb into bed. Christmas of 1994 was so difficult because two months earlier our eight-year-old son Tim had died of a brain tumor.

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My friend Doug used to work at an inner-city Christian men's hostel. He told me that as Christmas approached, the mood in the hostel became more and more foul, as the men became more mean and nasty to each other and the staff.

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I remember a man I will call Paul Stevens. Paul faced some mental challenges. He was able to live and function on his own, but he had trouble connecting with people. And so Paul had few friends, and most of the members of his family had died. Paul hated the Christmas season, and he especially hated Christmas day. Paul received no gifts, and he had no special people to spend

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This sermon illustrates the Lowry loop sermon structure and style of preaching Michele Hershberger advocates in the previous article. It is reprinted, by permission of the publisher, from *The Messenger: A Publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference* 46, no. 21 (December 3, 2008).

the day with. He couldn't even find a coffee shop that was open, where he could escape from his aloneness.

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Have you ever talked to someone who has just gone through a marriage break-up, or lost a loved one, or lost a job, or gone bankrupt, and asked how he feels about the Christmas season? If Christmas is good news, then why do so many people experience Christmas as such a difficult time?

There are probably many reasons, but one of them has to do with what we have done with the Christmas season. Every Advent I remember an article by Maynard Shelly that I read more than thirty years ago now. The article is provocatively titled "Do Christmas Cards Tell the Truth?" Shelly concludes that they don't. Think of how the typical Christmas cards portray the story: beautiful sentimental scenes of a confident and calm Joseph, a

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radiant Mary, and a peacefully sleeping baby Jesus, all surrounded by cute and cuddly animals. Is this the truth about Christmas?

On the basis of Luke's Christmas story, we imagine Jesus being born in a stable. A stable is a place where animals are kept. Stables come complete with certain animal by-products and the annoying flies and pungent odors related to these byproducts. So where in the Hallmark cards do we see the manure, the flies, the cobwebs, the stench? In the

Hallmark version of Christmas, the stable has been pressure-washed, the animals have all showered recently, and Mary looks nothing like an exhausted young women who has just gone through hard labour after a long journey and given birth to her first baby in a barn far from the familiarity of home and family.

It's easy to see why Christmas cards don't tell the truth. Realistic portrayals of the birth of Jesus aren't likely to sell many cards. And so we sentimentalize and romanticize Christmas and turn the story of Jesus' birth into a perfect event that lacks the unpleasant features that characterize the story as told in the New Testament.

Maybe it is precisely this false perfection that prevents many people from experiencing Christmas as good news. Often Christ-

mas in our society is about perfection. Christmas cards give us a perfect stable, a perfect Mary, and perfect animals. Television commercials give us (or promise us) the perfect gift, received in the context of a perfect family. (Families in such commercials are always complete, happy, and without any of the tension or conflict that afflicts pretty much every real family.) Martha Stewart gives us a perfectly decorated house, a perfectly set table, and a perfect meal.

No wonder many people do not experience Christmas as good news. No wonder the men at the hostel feel their aloneness and alienation all the more intensely at Christmas. No wonder poor and marginalized people feel their poverty and marginalization all the more acutely. No wonder grieving people feel overwhelmed by the waves of pain. When there is deep pain and brokenness in

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our lives, a perfect Christmas doesn't offer us much good news.

But the real good news of Christmas is that Jesus was born in a barn. The Lord of this universe came to us as love incarnate in the form of a vulnerable baby born to poor peasants. This baby was born in a dark, stinky, fly-infested stable. If you want to contemporize the story, imagine Jesus born in a back alley behind the Safeway store, where Joseph has made a bed for Mary and Jesus in the dumpster. And that is good news. God

does not come to us in and through perfection. Jesus the Christ was born into a world where there is manure, obnoxious disease-spreading flies, and far too often life stinks. And that is good news!

Christmas is not about Jesus being born into perfect stables or perfect families or perfect lives or a perfect world. Christmas is about Jesus being born into a world that is deeply broken and hurting, a world in need of healing and redemption. Our Christmas cards, shopping malls, and TV commercials want us to deny or turn away from the pain, suffering, and brokenness of our world. But there is not much good news in that, because if we dare to be honest with ourselves, we know that many forms of brokenness are all too real in our world.

The good news of Christmas is that God does not turn away from a broken and hurting world, but God enters and becomes immersed in this world and its misery. God sends Jesus to enter into the world's pain and bring light and hope and joy and peace and new life. God sends Jesus to enter our pain, our lives, to bring us light and hope and joy and new life.

The good news of Christmas can be summarized by the marvelous words of John 1:5, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Christ is the light that shone into the darkness of first-century Palestine dominated by an oppressive Roman Empire that ruled with an iron grip and taxed the life-blood out of the Jewish peasants. Christ came as light to heal the sick; he came to cast out life-destroying demons, to confront oppression, and to proclaim the good news that God's kingdom had arrived. Therefore, people could receive the marvelous grace of God and repent. They could leave behind sinful and destructive beliefs and ways of living. They could embrace the joy of God's reign, experience kingdom grace and forgiveness, and begin to live in life-giving kingdom ways now already, even amidst the darkness.

Christmas is about Jesus Christ entering the real world of first-century Palestine, and every time and place, in order to bring light, healing, forgiveness, renewal, and abundant life. Christmas is about Jesus coming into the pain and suffering of your life and mine with God's promise that someday all creation will be illuminated and renewed by the healing light of God. And we can receive and walk in that light now already.

Indeed, Christmas is good news, isn't it!

### **About the author**

Dan Epp-Tiessen is associate professor of Bible at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and has the privilege of teaching a bit of preaching on the side. He is the CMU editor of *Vision*. This sermon was preached to a group of young adults at a CMU Advent chapel.