

Words for the Eve of Christmas 2006
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Tonight we remember that the birth of Christ is our story, too. Baby Jesus was born into an unjust world with some similarities to our world today. If you've ever spent a night on the streets, then you know what "no room in the inn" means. If you've ever been made humble because people don't understand what's happened to you, then perhaps you know how Mary felt as a pregnant teenager. If you've ever had a family member who you stood by, in spite of embarrassment or ridicule, then you know what Joseph felt when he married this pregnant teenager.

If you've ever felt a deep longing to hear the voice of an angel who might comprehend the hard life of a shepherd doing a tedious and undervalued job then maybe you know the terror and then joy that the shepherds experienced when they heard the chorus of angels. And if you're wise and wealthy but still seeking after God, like the magi of old, this story is your story, too. If the world has ever handed you a raw deal or something you didn't deserve or left you out in the cold, you know about this journey into the night from Nazareth to Bethlehem and the harshness of the world.

The story of Jesus birth is our story of hope for a new beginning. His birth, life, and ministry that followed announced the year of Jubilee! Our liturgy during Advent has focused on the Jubilee year because it was supposed to come to the Jews every 50 years as a great celebration, and this year is our 50th anniversary as the United Church of Christ.

The Jubilee year was an ancient Jewish law that said that every 50 years, land confiscated through foreclosure would be returned to its original owners or their descendants; all debts were forgiven; all the fields were left unplanted in order to restore the land's fertility, and in general, all creation was given a chance to set things right, start over, begin anew. There was no stigma of filing for bankruptcy because this was god's doing; God's giving of a new beginning. Knowing that at least once in 50 years there would be a chance for a new beginning gave families' hope. I imagine those who'd become rich because of the poor's misfortune didn't look forward to the Jubilee year. Was it fair that they should give back what they'd acquired lawfully? But the Jubilee year was not about what was fair; it was about grace, mercy, and restorative justice.

On NPR last Sunday I listened to, "Speaking of Faith." The show interviewed a Palestinian man whose brother had been killed and an Israeli mother whose son had been killed. Both are leaders in an organization called the Parents' Circle where through their common experience of grief and loss, they work for restorative justice. Restorative justice doesn't seek to even the score. They know like Ghandi did that "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; pretty soon the whole world will be blind and toothless." This mother whose son had been killed and this man whose brother also had been killed were committed to work for restorative justice. One of them said, this: "It's easier to be right than honest." They said that it was easier to justify retribution than to be honest about the fact that justice in this world is often incomplete and does not necessarily contribute to a new order that might bring peace and hope for generations to come.

Every Christmas Eve we get to echo the voice of the angel and announce the year of Jubilee! In our world where there's too many refugees, too much poverty, too little voice for the powerless, too little opportunity for children to escape the trap of injustices that surround them, we announce the year of Jubilee.

In our world where people live poor in spirit, searching for fulfillment and meaning, longing to make sense out of senseless tragedy; we're here to announce the year of Jubilee. We come

to the understanding that being honest is harder than being right. What is “right”, what we deserve may even be transcended by the love of God that longs for all creation to live in sustained wholeness and harmony. Jubilee is God’s gift to everyone.

Jubilee requires a large, large measure of grace, the recognition that we are all part of the human family and that we all need forgiveness. In order for a new year of Jubilee, we must let go of the old years of guilt; we must stop justifying the past by perpetuating it into the present. We relinquish the wrongs that have been dealt us as well as our own wrong doings which we lament; because Jubilee is a chance to start again, and to start over, we must first let go.

I’d like to tell you a story that I first heard from Ray Buckley. He’s a pastor who comes from Native American traditions. This is his story of the *Christmas Moccasins*.

Grandmother and I walked through the cold of the December night. Grandmother always wore moccasins; as she walked they hardly made a sound. Holding onto her coat, I asked, “How much farther.” “Not far,” she said, “not far.” I wondered if the trees we passed remembered us. Months before we had walked this same path, an old woman and a small child. Three drunken youths had stopped us. Did the trees remember how the youth hit us? They knocked us down, laughing, and had taken our coats and my grandmother’s moccasins? My grandmother walked home barefoot in the snow and frostbite had taken two of her toes.

When we arrived home, we didn’t say a word; we didn’t know what to say. My grandmother boiled water in the teakettle; poured a cup half full for me and then poured canned milk into the hot water. Then she poured water into the basin and let down her hair which fell beneath her knees. She splashed water on her upturned face as she lifted her closed eyes. She dipped her hands into the basin again and again, and patted her hair, her shoulders, her torso, and her legs. This was her way of cleansing her spirit--the way of beginning something sacred. My grandmother was praying.

Then grandmother began to make three pairs of moccasins. She covered the sides and the tops of the moccasins with hundreds of faceted beads. Then she began sewing the beads on the bottoms of the moccasins something that was rarely done and which signified the honor with which they were being made. Each day the moccasins became more beautiful until on Christmas Eve they sat finished on a shelf. Grandmother took the brown paper from the butcher, smoothed it out, and wrapped each pair carefully.

Then filling the basin with water, grandmother dipped her hands and patted her face, her hair, her shoulders, her legs. Then she dipped my hands in the water and I did the same. We put on our coats and stepped out into the snowflakes which were falling. When we reached the top of the hill, grandmother stopped to pray, but my heart was pounding. “Why are we here?” “Why are we going to see them...on Christmas Eve?” Grandmother replied “We’re here to do the Creator’s work.”

When we reached the door, our knock was answered by a large man. Behind him was a juniper tree covered in Christmas lights. “I have small presents for your sons,” grandmother began. “May I give them?” She handed each a package carefully wrapped. To each she said, “I wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas. God bless you.” The room was quiet; no one spoke, three young men held three pairs of moccasins covered in beads that sparkled, white, red, blue and yellow.

The moon shone down as grandmother and I walked home. We left the house where three young men were captives of God’s love. But we were truly free, liberated by that same Creator’s love.

Like the giving of the Christmas moccasins, tonight we light our candles as a gift to the world. We join the angel chorus proclaiming that God has come to earth and God brings Jubilee, new beginnings, to all people. Perhaps if our candles shine bright enough, the glow will illumine God's love in new and astounding ways. Tonight we let our lights shine to make good on God's promise of long ago in the city of Bethlehem where a child was born, Christ the Lord.