

Why We Come
Christmas Eve, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Recently, an office of the U.S. Pentagon held a rather unusual contest.

An outfit called the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) placed red balloons eight-feet in diameter in 10 public locations around the country. In some cases, they disguised the balloons. In others, the balloons were hoisted 50 or 100 feet in the air.

The agency challenged anyone interested to find all the balloons, offering \$40,000 to the winner. It seems the researchers who came up with this idea wanted to study how information flows on the internet and across social networks - you know, Facebook, Twitter and other modern marvels of our times. More than 4,000 teams entered the contest and the winning team took just under nine hours to find all 10 balloons.

Along the way, the contest exposed the good and the not-so-good aspects of human behavior. Some teams focused as much on baffling their competition as finding the balloons. They spread misinformation and placed decoy balloons to deceive their competitors. Other teams went the timeless route of capitalism, offering cash rewards for accurate information. Still others, however, promised to give money to charity as a reward for anyone who helped out. The winning team from MIT did all of those things.

When I heard about this contest, I couldn't help think of it as a sort of modern-day metaphor for the real story that gathers us here tonight. Not a perfect metaphor, to be sure. But one that certainly contrasts life today with that of the shepherds, the magi and the young couple for whom there was no room in the inn.

Two thousand years ago, of course, the shepherds and the magi didn't receive texts or tweets or check their Facebook pages to hear about the coming of the messiah. An angel appeared to the shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

"Do not be afraid," the angel said. "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. Unto you this day a savior is born, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

And the shepherds quickly left to locate this miracle. No GPS. No map pulled from the World Wide Web. No cool apps on their I-Phones. Just the inspiration of an angel and a

multitude of heavenly hosts, praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among all those God favors.”

The wise men who came from the east at least had a star to guide them. And, like the shepherds, they came with great haste.

As with the modern-day episode, those who heard about and set forth to find the baby Jesus had a mix of motivations. The shepherds came out of humility and wonder. The Magi came to pay homage.

But when Herod got word of the child’s birth, his heart filled with hate. He told his priests and scribes to help him find the Christ child so that he might worship him. But this was only a deception for he meant to do away with this new threat to his worldly power.

On this Christmas Eve, there is part of each of us that wants mostly to focus on the purity and simplicity of that first Christmas. Our minds picture the manger scene, the gentle, un-intrusive presence of the animals, the soft light of the stars, the awe-filled wonder on the faces of all who were there and the glow around the manger.

So we come here tonight, to drink in the old, old story of our Lord’s birth, to give praise but also to find comfort in familiar hymns and carols, to find joy and love in each others’ faces. We come to find even just a moment’s peace by the flickering light of the candles.

We come in part to escape modernity, don’t we, to reach back two thousand years in hopes of finding our innocence?

But Jesus came then, and Jesus comes now, because we lost our innocence long before the first Christmas. Then, as now, mankind exhibited the full range of its God-given capabilities and free will, for good and evil.

But what the red-balloon experiment reminds us is that we have given birth to technology and tools so powerful, so wondrous and, in some cases, so lethal that Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the magi would have considered them miracles.

We harness science to advance the health and well-being of peoples around the world. We train massive computing power to trace the human genome. We search the stars light years away. We build community with others around the world through the computer keyboard and we share cultures, knowledge and information in seconds that not that long ago would have taken years.

But we've also fooled ourselves into thinking that we can use computers to tame financial risk and we've paid the price to find out we were wrong. And we've reduced warfare to the level of a video game, in which a pilot can direct a drone to kill half way around the world.

But Jesus came into the world then and Jesus comes now, anyway. And perhaps that is the real reason we come tonight, because Jesus came, anyway. Then, Jesus came anyway, even though Herod would commit an atrocity to try to stop him. Now, Jesus comes anyway, despite our own brokenness and wrong desires.

Jesus came anyway, as our prophet, our priest and our king. Most important, Jesus came as God's grace embodied, a promise of God's love that will never be broken. Jesus came as a new light into the world, a light that overcame the world's darkness, then as now.

As we heard in the reading from Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and savior, Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:11-14)

So we come tonight because Jesus came and because Jesus came we are a people of hope – hope that is rooted in the belief that if we live as Jesus taught we can use our abilities and free will to make the world a better place, but also hope and faith that tell us that Christ will come again to accomplish more than we could ever ask or imagine ... to heal the world of its worst motivations, once and for all.

The nineteenth century poet John Brownlie captured that timeless hope with these words.

The King shall come when morning dawns
And light triumphant breaks;
When beauty gilds the eastern hills
And life to joy awakes.

Not, as of old, a little child
To suffer and to die,
But crowned with glory like the sun

That lights the morning sky.
The King shall come when morning dawns
And earth's dark night is past;
O haste the rising of that morn
Whose day shall ever last.

And let the endless bliss begin,
By weary saints foretold,
When right shall triumph over wrong,
And truth shall be extolled.

The King shall come when morning dawns
And light and beauty brings:
Hail, Christ the Lord! Your people pray:
Come quickly, King of Kings.

To you and yours, may God's light, Jesus the Christ, inspire and illumine all of your days. Merry Christmas.

Amen.