

CHRISTMAS EVE, 2018: READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!

Luke 2:1-20

Dear Family of God:

On behalf of the staff of Muhlenberg and my colleague, Pr. Mark, I wish you and your entire family—including those at a distance—all the blessings of God during this Christmas season and throughout the New Year. It is a gift and a privilege to preach the “good news of great joy” on this holy night as we gather round the manger.

I want to thank our young people and our ministry specialist, Mycah, for decorating the Chrismon tree in the Gathering Area. I must admit that I miss a Christmas tree in this beautiful worship space. There doesn't seem to be enough room, but I have a solution for you. At the beginning of my ministry at my second congregation, I was in for a surprise. After the Fourth Sunday of Advent, a crew hauled in a giant tree and placed it in the chancel—directly in front of the pulpit! After I got over the initial shock, I suggested, maybe I should be the voice of God and preach from the pulpit behind the tree! Or maybe I should preach about the hidden nature of God, all the while hiding in the pulpit. They were not amused. So I preached from the top step of the chancel, and I had to admit, the tree was beautiful.

A Story of Hide and Seek.

A church decked out in Christmas decorations is a wonderful place to play that favorite game, Hide and Seek. Can't you just imagine hiding in the darkness of this church tonight or trying to find someone hiding under a pew? The Christmas story is all about hiding and seeking. Because of a census, Mary and Joseph head to a little, out of the way town near Jerusalem. When the time comes for the birth this young couple is hidden away in a hillside cave with the animals. And those poor nomadic shepherds are hidden by the rock-strewn hillsides of Bethlehem. The evening itself is wrapped in a mantle of darkness until the multitude of heavenly messengers sings its announcement that the baby born is Savior, Christ, and Lord. After this startling message, the shepherds are given two clues: 1) the baby is wrapped in strips of cloth; and. 2) will be lying in a cattle trough! Then the search begins. Yes, the Christmas gospel is a divinely inspired game of Hide and Seek.

God's Greatest Gift.

We can't make light of this gospel. This story is God's greatest gift to us this Christmas. It tells us of God's gracious favor, and of God's desire for reconciliation among people through this child. The great Lutheran composer, Bach, in his Christmas Oratorio, connects the birth of Jesus with the suffering and dying of Jesus. He does this over and over by combining Christmas lyrics with the melody of the passion hymn, “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded.” The candlelight of Christmas has its parallel in the candlelight of the Great Easter Vigil. This child was born to save. This story is more than a game. It's a matter of life and death.

Aren't We Hiding?

That is welcome news because our lives are played out in a game of Hide and Seek, aren't they? We hide from God, much like Adam and Eve did, hoping that God will not find us. We hide from our obligations, confident that others will overlook our shortcomings. We hide in the dark corners of life, hoping that our hurtful behaviors toward others and self will not

be exposed. You and I are trapped in the “deep darkness” of this world, engulfed by division and separation. We desperately need a Reconciler, a Savior, the Messiah to bring us out of the darkness into the light.

Is Anyone Ready for God’s Coming?

God speaks through this story tonight and into our stories and says: READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!

Were Mary and Joseph prepared to hear this as they huddled in the cave with the animals? This poor girl had to birth a child without the help of midwife, water, daylight, cradle; with only strips of cloth in which to wrap the Hope of the World and the Prince of Peace. And what kind of step-dad was Joseph that he couldn’t provide proper lodging for this moment? To this young, poor, Jewish couple displaced from home, unprepared, and in hiding, God says: ‘Ready or Not, Here I Come.’

Meanwhile, the angels had roused those shepherds from sleep and their boring routine with the announcement: “Ready or Not, God Has Come!” Those smelly, down-to-earth guys must have looked at each other in amazement and said, “What is going on? You want us to search for a baby, in the middle of the night?

It took an act of courage for those migrant workers to walk off their job in the darkness and look for a baby lying, in of all places, a cattle trough in a hillside cave at the back of a Bethlehem motel in the dead of night! Who would be ready to play such a game of Hide-and-Seek on the spur of the moment under those conditions?

We’re part of this story too, you know. I don’t know if you’re ready for Christmas or not, but tonight God comes to the well prepared, partly prepared, unprepared, and past-preparing, and says: “READY OR NOT, HERE I COME: I LOVE YOU. LET ME BE BORN IN YOUR LIFE. HERE ARE MY GIFTS OF PEACE AND GRACE. LET ME CARRY YOU OUT OF THE DARKNESS INTO MY LIGHT.”

The Good Shepherd Brings Grace and Favor

Tonight amid candlelight and carols, God speaks words of peace and favor. As we huddle with strangers and relatives, God comes to us in a holy meal that we call the Christ-mass. With zeal and passion, the Crucified and Risen Lord comes to us. Jesus is the Good Shepherd on the Search. Here he seeks us out to make us his own. Here he forgives us for the way we have hurt or ignored others. Here he assures us that we are not alone as we face difficult and painful situations, even death. After all, it was at the tomb that God again shouted: READY OR NOT, HERE I COME! The earth shook and the stone was rolled away and an angel of the Lord said: “He is not here! He is risen!”

Through this story and the simple meal that we share, God loves us, and reconciles us to one another, and gives us presence. No, not P-R-E-S-E-N-T-S, but P-R-E-S-E-N-C-E. Here we receive God’s gracious and forgiving presence.

The End of the Game

How will this divine game of Hide and Seek be played out?

The shepherds found the child and worshiped and spread the joyful news that night. The shepherds are never again mentioned by St. Luke. Did they return to their routines or move on to other things? Were their lives changed because of this encounter with God? How would you write the ending of their story?

We do know how Mary responded: she pondered the meaning of God's intervention in her life and the role her son would play in God's plan of salvation. Mary would be there throughout her son's ministry. She stood by him at the foot of the cross while he was dying. It was there that she adopted John as her new son, and in so doing, became a model for the church of caring community. And Mary inspired the outreach and mission of the early church as it expanded from Asia Minor to Greece and beyond. As tradition has it, Mary may have been the source for Luke's Christmas story that we heard tonight, that is God's gift to us.

How Will You Respond?

How will this divine game of Hide and Seek be played out in your life?

I invite you tonight to receive this message of God's favor and peace, to ponder Christ's meaning for your life, to live in communion with Christ's people, to let the Spirit mold and move you to share your faith. We may not be ready for this invitation. Our response may be more likely to keep hiding. But "Ready or not, God is ready for us!" God is ready for our love, our worship, our tears, our questions, our commitment.

"And this shall be the sign: you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger."

DON'T HIDE! SEEK! Seek this one who is born to save. Seek this child who delivers you from every sin, every evil, even death! Say with me, "Whether I'm ready or not, Lord, here I come to you!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen