

**December 24, 2020**

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### Prepare a Place

The year 2020 was to be the year of 2020 vision. At the beginning of the year, we were encouraged by some, to look into the future and imagine what could be. We were encouraged to develop a 2020 vision for the year. You might recall that I made some predictions. Writing in the January newsletter, I said, in part, “While 2020 is a significant milestone, there is nothing to suggest that the year 2020 will be any different than any other year. There will be good times and bad. Blessings and challenges...”

Then I went on to say that I had complete confidence in the following predictions.

- People will be born, and people will die. True
- Political division will continue and even heat up as we approach the presidential election. True
- The USA will win gold medals in the Summer Olympic Games. Nope. The Games weren't held. Something that I was so confident about didn't happen. I certainly did not see the coming of COVID and the challenges, hardships, griefs it would cause.

One of the things 2020 has taught us that we can't predict or know the future. Or can we? Because of the babe of Bethlehem, we can be absolutely certain of our ultimate future.

If you are ready or not, Christmas is here. Your preparations and celebrations have and will certainly look different. There are traditional preparations and spiritual preparations. It was fun for me to learn from the youth, at our virtual Christmas party, of the special family traditions that each enjoy. You have your traditions. The special decorations you put up. The yummy goodies you make. Such traditions take preparation.

There are also spiritual preparations. Even with a COVID Christmas, this is potentially a busy and chaotic season. Therefore, it is good to spend extra time with the Lord with Advent Calendars, devotions, worship services, in order to stay focused, and centered, and connected, and not fragmented, distracted, and on edge. There are spiritual preparations that make our celebration of Christmas special.

God made preparations to bring His Son into the world. Over the years, He prepared His people to receive this wonderful gift of salvation. When you read through the Old Testament, you will see, time and time again, God's powerful promises to bless His people with the coming Savior; the conquering King; the reigning Messiah.

After 400 years of prophetic silence, an angel appeared to Mary, declaring

that, though a virgin she was having a baby. “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Lk 1:32-33

Mary and Joseph were certainly not prepared to hear this wondrous news. Though engaged, they were not yet married. Mary asked, “how can this be since I am a virgin?” And when Joseph heard the news, he thought Mary had been unfaithful and planned not to continue with their planned marriage and to dismiss her quietly. It took an angelic announcement to Joseph to convince him that what Mary was saying was true.

And it took the Caesar’s pronouncement to assure that the baby would be born in the prophesied town of Bethlehem. I hope you filled out your census this year. How would you like to have to travel, miles by foot, to your hometown to register?

If the traditional understanding of the birth of Jesus is to be followed, it would indicate that Mary and Joseph were also not prepared for Jesus birth. In the way some tell the story, it would appear to be very irresponsible of Joseph to take his full-term bride on a 90-mile trip by foot, and possibly donkey, to go to Bethlehem for a census. As the story is told, when they arrived, they rushed from place to place looking for a room. Bethlehem was bedlam. But a kind innkeeper,

who by the way is never mentioned in the scriptures, provided a stable for them just in time for the birth of Jesus that night.

But a proper understanding of the biblical account would indicate that they were prepared. Because of the census, Joseph was returning to his historic hometown and, we can assume, he sought lodging with relatives. The word that is translated “inn” is a bad translation from the Greek. When we hear the Good Samaritan taking the victim to an inn, the word there is the common word for such accommodations. But in Luke 2, the word would be better translated “guest room.” Mary and Joseph were guests in a home that was so overcrowded there was no room in a guest room, so they were accommodated in a room that kept the family’s livestock, adjacent to the house. And that’s why we hear of a manger. As an aside, when the wise men come, where do they find Jesus? In a house.

When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, there’s no mention of a frantic search. There’s no rushing around. Mary and Joseph had gotten there in plenty of time for Mary to deliver her baby. As Luke 2:6 says, “while they were there.” That indicates they have been there awhile. They were prepared for his birth.

When Christ was born, Mary wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. Where is the only other time in Luke’s gospel where someone wraps Jesus in bands of cloth and lays him down? That’s right! When Joseph of Arimathea takes Jesus down from the cross, he wraps him in strips of linen and

lays him in his tomb. Can you see what Luke is doing? Christ's cradle points to his cross. Christ's birth points to his death.

Jesus was born, lived a perfect life, died a horrific death, rose and ascended gloriously – Jesus did all that to prepare a place for us. We may not know what 2021 will be like, but because of the babe of Bethlehem, we can be absolutely certain of our ultimate future. Tomorrow, I'll be speaking about how we are to prepare for Paradise. Tonight, we saw how Mary and Joseph prepared a place for the baby Jesus to rest his head in a manger. Now, how do we prepare a place in our hearts this Christmas Eve for Jesus to be present with us? How do we prepare to receive the gift of Jesus at Christmas?

Jesus was born during the time of Caesar Augustus. Augustus was full of himself. He allowed others to call him "son of God," while at his death, the Roman Senate decreed that he was a god. During his lifetime, Caesar Augustus was also called "savior." Rome revered him as the one who brought peace to "the entire world." The empire called his military exploits "the gospel." He considered himself great. His interest that first Christmas, was how to enrich Rome's coffers through taxation, not in God's gift to the world.

Where are your thoughts and heart this Christmas? How do we prepare for Jesus?

You need to see your need. Who will lift the guilt and self-loathing you

experience? The emptiness and meaninglessness you feel? The disappointment and shame? Perhaps you find yourself bored or disinterested in this Good News. Are you just enduring a Christmas Eve service as you think about presents under a tree, rather than the gift of Jesus' presence? God's gift to you was placed in a manger, lifted on a cross, and laid down in a tomb. By his resurrection and ascension, he now wears a crown. We prepare by seeing our need.

We prepare by receiving Christ's deed. He did this all for you. Believe and receive this Good News.

Don't simply prepare a place but THE place for Jesus in your life. Just as you carve out space in your life for the activities that are important and enjoyable for you, you need to do the same for Jesus. We don't just worship him on the eve of his birth, but we recognize that he is with us, Immanuel, God with us, every day, all day. And while our earthly future is uncertain, because of the babe of Bethlehem, we can be absolutely certain that our ultimate future is with the Lord who has prepared a place for us.