

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA 22310  
Christmas Eve (10:00 PM), December 24, 2010

Isaiah 9: 2–7  
Luke 2:1–14

## TOO CLOSE TO THE CRÈCHE

It's interesting, isn't it, how strange and random things can strike a chord within us. Especially at this time of year when our memories are so ripe, when our longings are so crisp. I remember coming to this area and being a little bit anxious. This was, after all, more of a city than I had ever been used to.

And I remember an ad that came on the radio about this time of year that just compounded that fear. It was an ad that was captivating to me because it spoke so clearly of the gospel, and I thought the minister who was advertising for that particular church must be one of the greatest orators God had ever blessed in the ministry. And then I found out he had taken the words from Craig Barnes, a Presbyterian minister who had been here long before us. Craig is now the McNeely theology professor at Pittsburgh Seminary. Here are the words that Craig had penned and this radio personality had co-opted for his own:

“Sixty-six years before the birth of Christ in an aristocratic community of Rome, a very important child was born. As soon as he had arrived, a messenger raced to the Roman senate and announced, ‘the next ruler of the world is born.’ His name was Octavius. And he was destined to become the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He grew up in the palace. He was educated by the finest teachers of literature and philosophy and government. And at the ripe age of 33 he was the uncontested of the entire Roman Empire. All he had to do was give the word and armies would march and ships would sail. If he spoke, the world would move for him. The senate gave him the name Emperor Augustus, meaning the exalted one who reigned over the golden empire. When he was sixty-six, he sent out a decree that all the world should be registered. It was during this census that another child was born in a very unimportant village in a very unimportant part of the Roman empire. There were no Roman messengers running to announce his birth to the senate. Instead there was an angelic messenger to announce his birth to the least important inhabitant in the empire—a band of shepherds living outdoors. ‘Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy, for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David, a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord. The second child was born and laid in a manger, in humble beginnings because there was no room for him in the normal places. He was raised not in a palace, but in a common Jewish home. Not educated in literature and philosophy, but in carpentry, and at 33 he did not ascend to reign the Roman empire. But he did ascend to a Roman cross. He was in the world and the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.”

We never make much room for Jesus, do we? And that is why we killed him as surely as those irate church-goers of the first century. But in his ultimate act of sacrifice, the sins of a dark world were transformed. And we were given a righteousness that was not our own. He became the king of a whole new kingdom. And his kingdom has outlived every empire.

I wonder if we can recognize ourselves in Luke's story? And so I borrow a story tonight from a Knoxville, Tennessee minister. Be careful, this one really sneaks up on you.

“Old Henry had wished the clerk at the liquor store a Merry Christmas. He crumpled the paper bags around the tops of the two bottles of wine that wasn't as cheap as normal. When you're a panhandler, you can normally only collect enough for one bottle of wine, but it was Christmas Eve and he had been very successful. He'd caught people coming from their offices and going to their parties and they had been generous, and Henry had treated himself to an extra bottle of the fairly decent stuff. And as the evening fell, he drank the first bottle in no time at all. Then the wind came and his body ached. His knees began to pulse and he could feel every degree the temperature dropped. He got up and walked down the street to warm himself. He stayed away from the shelters that night. They are so crowded—so deceptively hopeful. So jolly, he just couldn't bear it. And then he came on to the court house and the church lawn next door. There was a manger and some bales of hay. A lighted star. He thought back to his own family. It was a place that at least seemed like warmth. With a sarcastic laugh he talked himself into what he would do for the evening. He found the bales of hay closest to the back of the manger. It was dark there. He pulled some hay around him, and before long he was completely camouflaged from view. Any wandering police or religious pilgrims would overlook him. So he downed bottle number two and curled up and went to sleep.

In his dreams, there was an angel choir and then a child speaking. ‘And she gave birth to her first born son,’ the child said, ‘wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.’ Henry was in a fog by now. But slowly he realized this was no dream. This was real. His eyes opened and shut. He was sure that he was dead, that the angels had come to get him. That he had frozen to death on that church lawn. But the child's voice went on. ‘In that region, there were shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night.’ Again, Henry closed his eyes hard and opened them even harder. He had lain down in the middle of a living nativity scene. And he could feel people all around him—lots of people. He held his breath and he turned his head so he could just see between the bales of hay. There they were, the First Presbyterian Church's Youth Group. And they were holding a candle light service by their crèche. Henry froze. He tried hard to keep himself from speaking aloud the full name of the Lord. He closed his eyes again and slowly let himself breathe. And then he thought, what a reckless almighty to land me here in this spot. There was a little girl and a baby doll and shepherds passing by. And the child spoke her words and despite his best effort, Henry's memory began to take over and he whispered on his lips the words from the child. ‘Fear not for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you. You will find the babe wrapped in

swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.’ And suddenly Henry and all the children were praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace good will towards men.’

Now Henry closed his eyes more gently and for a moment he, too, was an angel. He was a shepherd. He was a king. Eventually the crowd sang *Silent Night*, blew out their candles. They wound up their electric cords, picked up the crib, loaded up the children, and they all went home. And when he was absolutely certain that the last church goer had gone, Henry sat up and poked his head over the top of the hay bales. He looked up to the stars and he spoke one prayer. “Dear Lord ... that was a close one.”

Do we allow ourselves to really come close to the manger—to our crèche? A place where children and old folks, commoners and kings, are all part of the story? Where drunks, and even some of those who consider themselves respectable, are welcome? A manger, a place where there’s really no need for us to keep a safe distance if we can hear our Lord. *Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.*

If we want to come close, we’ll have to be okay that we’re there with those who aren’t so holy—those who aren’t so worthy. We will be standing next to the undeserving, to the lonely, to the grieving. And in our company, there will be those who consider themselves failures. And each of us will hear “good tidings of great joy to you.” Tonight we are invited to come close—close to the crèche, close to our Lord, born for us in a place called Bethlehem of Judea (or in a place where you might shelter tonight).

If it’s been a long time since you came close to the crèche, hear God’s invitation as you worship the Lord with everything in your heart—everything that you need. Amen.