

*Notes for a sermon preached for the 6 p.m. Holy Eucharist at the Episcopal Church of the Nativity, Boyne City, Michigan, on Christmas Eve, 2025, by the Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates, Priest-in-Charge.*

You may remember, not so very long ago, when we were surprised to learn that more Americans got their news from the television than newspapers.

That was maybe thirty years ago.

You may be even more surprised to learn that today nearly a third of people under forty say that *satirical* news programs—such as *The Daily Show*—for them, these programs are taking the place of traditional news broadcasts.

And no wonder, since you get not only a hint of current events, but you also get it with a good dose of humor.

It's a lot easier to hear the news, particular *bad* news, if it is told as a joke.

As is his habit, Stephen Colbert, one of the two leading satire hosts, posts segments of his show on the internet, many of which go viral.

You can come across them on Facebook—more than once.

And the one I want to share is not from this month, but from a couple of year's back.

I hope you will agree it is worth sharing excerpts of it with you here today.

In the segment, Colbert raised considerable ire against what he calls the “flagrant injection of charity into the Christmas season,” thereby reminding us what this season is really about.

He even quoted conservative talk-show host Bill O'Reilly as suggesting that “Jesus said we only have to love those who deserve it.”

In reply, Colbert says, “What I like best about this argument is its complete factual inaccuracy.”

He concluded the segment with this stinging critique of our nation: “If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we have to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition—and then admit that we just don't want to do it!”

Now, those of us of a certain age hear this and may say “Ouch. That hurts.” But it received riotous laughter from Colbert's live audience.

Because—politics aside—Jesus *did* command us to love the poor and serve the needy, without condition.

And so very often we do *not* want to do that; instead, we want to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we can be sometimes.

And that is another assertion with complete factual inaccuracy—for Jesus, as well as the

God who sent him to us, wants nothing more than to give everything they have, so that we might have abundant life.

It would be much easier to understand if Jesus were like Santa Claus, with a big bulging bag full of gifts, one for each of us.

“Ho, ho, ho! Here is *forgiveness* for you, *healing* for you, *mercy* for you.”

And then he’d get back on his sleigh and ride into the sky, wishing all a good night.

But the biggest gift Jesus gave us was not some *thing* we get to keep, not something that can be wrapped with paper tied up with a bow, not even the intangible gift of grace— but an offering and sacrifice for our sin, our redemption, our salvation.

He gave his very life, that we might live unto righteousness.

And he, who we Christians accept as our Savior, King, and Lord, came into the world, not robed in royal splendor, not in power and pomp, but as one of the poorest.

These are very strange paradoxes, when you think about it:

The creator of the universe, the omnipotent God of power and might, came into the world and became human not only as a helpless little baby—but one born in a stable, with lowly working-class parents.

At the same time, we claim all power is his, all glory! A

ll things are in his hand.

And yet, we wait for the fulfillment of his teaching nearly two thousand years later.

If that’s what it is to be all-powerful, well, God is certainly stingy in exercising his might. Or perhaps God is patient?—very, very patient.

And that’s because we have resisted, put up roadblocks, refused to cooperate. We’ve all done those things, at one time or another. Because living the life of a faithful Christian is really hard work.

The challenge is aptly put by Stephen Colbert, I think.

For it is far easier to pretend that Jesus was as selfish as we can be sometimes, or to just say “no” to his command.

But if we are to be faithful and honest, we have to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition.

And this is precisely where Christmas is helpful.

No, not the gifts, not the feasting, not the parties—but the voices of children, the wonder of hope, and the glory of familiar songs.

Our confusion, our pondering, our wonderings are met by clear and unequivocal proclamations of hope.

From the familiar hymn: “we shall see him,” “Not in that poor lowly stable, with the oxen standing round...; but in heaven...: Christ, revealed to faithful eye, set at God’s right hand

on high.”

Do any of us live as if we really believe *those* glad tidings of great joy?

Not just that Jesus ever was born, or even that Jesus is our Savior—but that he is our lifelong pattern, that he was tempted, scorned, rejected, and that he knew both tears and smiles, like us.

And that his own redeeming love shall lift us all to his heavenly home.

Sometimes, it seems as if we live our lives not really being sure that is true for us. And that’s where Christmas is helpful.

We have an opportunity not just to start all over again—that comes at Easter.

But to start *anew*, from the beginning, as if none of what we know as wrong ever happened.

For every Christmas brings a new birth.

A new birth, in which the light of God’s incarnate Word is poured upon us.

A new birth, in which this light will be kindled in our hearts.

A new birth, in which this light will shine forth in our lives, as we go from this place and into the night.

As Christ was born this night in Bethlehem, may we be born again this Christmas. Amen.