Christmas Greetings,

My hope and prayer for you this Christmas is that you “search out” a Christmas experience. At first this phrase sounds very simple, but the truth is it requires some effort. You may enjoy music, theatre, long walks in the snow or the occasional elegant meal with close friends or family. Whatever your choice may be it is part of your “search” for the Christmas spirit.

As I sit down to write you this pastoral letter I do so filled with many thoughts and feelings about this season. You and I are in a new era, many things are different. I am deeply sensitive to the fact that either you or someone you know is overworked and underpaid. I’m also aware that many families are struggling with illnesses, stress, anxiety, discouragement, disillusionment and disappointment. That’s why “searching out” a Christmas experience is so important this year. We need a bold and bright reminder of the birth of the Christ Child. We need to step back from the constant bombardment of negative messages from the media. This is not ignoring our socio-economic situation but rather choosing to focus on our faith that sustains us while we try to deal with all the other pressures in our lives.

Having grown up in the small town of Simcoe, I’m filled with memories of the Christmas light show in the park downtown. I believe it was called the Christmas Panorama. For 16 years of my life that experience was prevalent in our household. For the last 5 years of high school I walked from the high school through the park to get home every day. No wonder it had a lasting impression on me. Christmas had a lasting impression on me due to the fact that decorating the tree was a huge event every year. The house was filled with symbols and trinkets reminding our family about the Christmas season. In my teen years the church and its events and activities were ingrained into my family’s schedule. For me the church always felt more like home than my own house and so I certainly didn’t mind spending the vast majority of time at the church in December.

At the risk of repeating myself my small town experience meant that I didn’t have to search out a Christmas experience. It was almost handed to me by my surroundings. It wasn’t until years later that I realized that I had adopted most of those activities and events and simply integrated them into our family’s Christmas experience. Now there was 1 exception and that was the long walks in the Panorama Christmas park. To this day Joyce and I return every Christmas to Simcoe. This year our grandchildren will be joining us. Isn’t it wonderful when life-long traditions can become intergenerational adventures?

It’s probably helpful for me to admit my biases early in this pastoral letter. Each person is going to come at these issues from a different perspective and I respect yours. Notwithstanding I believe in miracles. I have absolutely no problem acknowledging the virgin birth. I believe God can do anything! I believe in the two faithful parents who raised Jesus to love and obey God. And finally I believe that the Holy family were refugees that escaped a deadly situation to live out a few years in a safer environment. I am convinced that this belief system informs my experience of Christmas. This is a marvelous time of year for you to step back from your day to day routine and prayerfully ask yourself “What do I believe in?” You may be reading this letter with a strong belief system or you may be struggling to decide what you believe. No matter what the situation, you and I begin from where we are. That’s the good news about God’s love for us.

May I take a moment to share with you my prayerful concern for what I believe prevents people from taking the risk of “searching out” a Christmas experience? Either you or someone you know and love has a long pattern of painful experiences at Christmas time. This includes years of loss, grief, fear and uncertainty. To be specific, I am aware of couples that chose to end their relationship at Christmas time. I’ve also witnessed families fighting during the festive season. The great challenge is to decide what you want out of this Christmas experience and then to be intentional about embracing the experiences that will bring a blessing to you this Christmas. You deserve to be happy this Christmas season.

I suspect that you have your own favourite part of the Christmas story. Perhaps it’s Mary and Joseph searching for somewhere to stay on that first Christmas Eve. Maybe it’s your thoughts and feelings about an innkeeper that did not have room for the holy family. Perhaps you have a contemporary reflection on the fact that Joseph did not make a reservation at a hotel ahead of time. Maybe your mind is filled with images of a cold barn (stable) where live animals wandered while Mary and Joseph converted a cow trough into a manger. There are so many possibilities. For me the reflections begin with the shepherds (Luke 2: 8-20). I want to invite you to take a moment to imagine yourself as one of the shepherds. It’s helpful to begin by noting that the shepherds were on the night shift. This was an exceedingly difficult job. It was a high risk job with intense labour and it was certainly not respected by most people in society. What excites me about the shepherds encounter with the angels is that God chose to encounter humans in the midst of their workday. Have you ever noticed how often God encounters people at night? In this case angels appeared to the shepherds and insisted that the good news would mean a great change in their priorities. What’s amazing about this is that you may be thinking about a change but you are waiting for the right incentive to inspire you to make that change. I would think a sky filled with angels bringing the good news of the birth of Jesus Christ was more than sufficient for the shepherds of that time. Let us try to remember that God sent the angels to the shepherds long before he sent the good news to the politically powerful.

I was inspired when I read about the shepherds’ “response” to the good news. They didn’t just thank God for a wonderful show in the sky but they acknowledged they had an encounter with the Holy. Indeed, a holy “experience”. They responded by getting up and going to Bethlehem. We are called to respond to the good news of Christ’s birth in our lives. Indeed, we need to be intentional about moving from where we are to where our Lord may be calling us to be. In the words of Herbert O’Driscoll, “We have to go and see and touch and worship Christ for ourselves… We have to discover a way to let others know what our Lord has come to mean to us.”

It’s so easy to get discouraged in a post covid environment. It’s easy to say “I’ll just stay home tonight”. But, there is something deep within our souls that craves more of a relationship with God. We need that personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We desire to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit to guide our lives most important decisions. And finally, we are compelled to have healthy relationships with those we choose to have near us. All this begins with “searching out” a Christmas experience.

This Christmas I would like to invite you to watch your favourite Christmas movie and/or listen to all your favourite Christmas music. You might even decide to find a light show in a local park. Or if you are really adventurous, make the drive to Simcoe. But my most sincere hope is that you will take a few moments and re-read the Christmas story and be refreshed by the fact that the Christ Child was born for you.

May I take this opportunity to invite you to join us for our Christmas services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day? We gather Christmas Eve and 4,7 and 10pm. We also gather Christmas Day at 10am. May I invite you to be part of the Christmas experience this year? Please be assured of my thoughts and prayers for you and your loved ones this Christmas.

Yours in Christ

The Rev Dr Stephen Hendry