

## “Thin Places”

As a Christian pastor and preacher, I always feel especially challenged at Christmas. Our traditional observance of the Nativity of Jesus Christ is like a Christmas tree over laden with the weight of ornaments accumulated over the years and expectations which often can't really be met. How do I sort through all the ornaments and help everyone refocus on the tree itself?

Those who gather for Christmas services know the story well. We have told and retold the story and clergy have preached sermon upon sermon on the same text. The Bible actually has relatively little to say about the birth of Jesus. In comparison with the rest of the Gospel narrative, the account of his birth provides only a brief prelude to the full story.

Pastor Rick Warren, best selling author of the “Purpose Driven” books and a recognized and well respected Christian leader has just published a new book, *The Purpose of Christmas*. I'm sure this book will also be hugely successful and that many will find it as a wonderful aid for their spiritual journey.

I was taken by Rick Warren's simple but succinct summary of the Christmas story. As the Gospel According to Luke narrates the beloved story of the angels appearing to shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem, Pastor Warren points out that the angel message had three parts. First, they proclaimed “Good Tidings of Great Joy”. Indeed, many are hard pressed this Christmas, in the midst of difficult economic times and an extended war, to feel any sense of “Great Joy”. Nonetheless, at its core, Christmas is all about great joy, even in the simplicity and poverty of a Palestinian stable.

Secondly, Warren reminds us that the angels declared “Good News”. The essential Christian message to the world is this simple. Christianity attempts to declare that God has come into our world, bringing salvation and hope.

And finally, we are reminded that the angels concluded their chorus with a proclamation of “Good Will”. Pastor Warren understands this declaration to be a call for reconciliation which is unlocked by forgiveness. Its power is in the universal hope for “peace on earth, good will to man”.

Christmas then is basically about Good Tidings, Good News, and Good Will. But I sense that there is more yet which must be said.

Celtic Christians have long been fascinated by the concept of “Thin Places”. This term has been widely used by those immersed in the traditions, theology, and experience of the Scots, Irish, and Welsh. A ‘thin place’ is a holy or spiritual place. Those who find themselves standing on holy ground or in a holy moment, discern a thin membrane separating the temporal and the eternal, the profane and the sacred. When we find ourselves in a thin place, we know ourselves to be in the Presence of God. And so it was that the stable in Bethlehem became the ultimate Thin Place.

Christmas is the ultimate “Thin Moment” and Bethlehem represents the eternal “Thin Place”. What we are about to celebrate is nothing less than God among us. The angels proclaimed this Thin Place with Good Tidings, Good News, and Good Will. By God’s grace, every Christmas is a Thin Place experience.