

A New Start  
Luke 2:1-16  
First Presbyterian Church  
December 24, 2016  
Rev. Glen Bell

Wayne Meisel is a friend. He works at the Center for Faith and Service at McCormick Seminary in Chicago. Last week he traveled to see a friend he hadn't seen since college graduation.

His friend Brad is extraordinary, Wayne says. Brad teaches GED classes to adults. He has developed a program where adult learners teach what they know to others. He has used his marketing background to encourage individuals to complete their education and develop entrepreneurial start-ups.

As Wayne tells it, Brad adores his wife, talks to his adult children twice a week, has not had a drop of alcohol for seven years, and works out daily.

But getting to see Brad is not easy, because he is currently serving a twelve-year prison sentence in the federal prison in Herlong, California.

This is how Wayne describes their visit. "The thing that struck me when I first saw him this past week was the joy in Brad's face and the lightness in his step. [During our conversation] Brad wanted to know everything. When I told stories of my kids, Brad wanted to know more. When I shared things about my work he asked me to continue. Never had I experienced a conversation that went so deep for so long.

"As I began to share some of my personal and professional struggles, Brad listened intently. '[But] look what you have, Wayne. It's all great stuff. You're a great guy, your family loves you, and you're doing important work.' It took the words and example of a man who had lost so much to help me find all the things that I had."

Wayne sums it all up this way. "I have never seen anything like it. Brad has freed himself from anger, bitterness and disappointment, and instead filled his life with a sense of resolve, purpose and hope. I know people with millions in the bank, who live in large houses, have wonderful families and good reputations, and who live in a world of pity and self-doubt that Brad has transformed."

Christmas is a new start. Christmas comes to those who need a new beginning.

Oh, we know who we are. We know what it means to need a new start, something different.

We are the ones who serve our country, who stand a post far from home and loved ones and the Christmas tree and the presents and the turkey. We are the ones who respond first and fastest when 911 is called or the alarm bell rings. We are the ones who sit with our husband in the ICU just days before Christmas. We are the ones who miss our husband, gone a year, who miss our wife, gone two months. We are the ones who wonder if our son will get better after his chemo, the chemo that starts again only three days from now. We are the ones who have to have the surgery repeated and the ones who receive the immunotherapy treatment again, only two days before Christmas Eve. We are the ones whose daughter is in jail or whose son was arrested three weeks ago.

And we are the ones who love them, pray for them, remember them.

If we are not careful, the heaviness of it all gets inside us. We miss our brother or our husband or our aunt or our cherished friend so much that we feel like we are in prison.

That is what Christmas is for.

Christmas is good news of a great joy for all the people. Christmas is a new start. Sometimes all of us get lost in the doubt and darkness and dread. We lose our way. Sometimes we lose ourselves. We don't have to be in federal prison to know that we need a Savior.

Right then, Jesus is born – into our world, into our hearts, into the moment of our deepest need. The baby Jesus comes to transform us and our world.

That's why we sing and the angels sing and all creation sings at the top of its voice, "Glory to God in the highest!" Praise and thanks to almighty God, who leaves us not in darkness and despair but comes to rescue and redeem.

None of us are physically in prison this Christmas Eve. But we may have fallen into times and places that have left us far from home, lost and alone, far from those who would pick us up and dust us off and love us.

But Jesus is not far away. He is with us this Christmas Eve. He yearns to love us and deliver us, to walk with us through the pain, to save us from despair.

He yearns to give us a new start.

Whether you have followed Jesus Christ for decades or whether you are wondering if it could make any sense at all, my hope and prayer is this Christmas will be a new start. Like those shepherds, shocked and surprised – and like Brad, imprisoned yet free – may we discover that God's goodness and presence is with us and for us.

That's right: God's goodness and God's tender presence is for you and for me.

May Jesus Christ, who was willing to lose so much, even his life, to help us find all the things we have, change you and me forever.

Merry Christmas.