

*This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

Novelist Sebastian Faulks tells the story of a man named Jack Firebrace, a coal miner from Edmonton, England, who during World War I found himself in France on the front lines of battle. He was too old to be a soldier, but miners like him had been recruited to dig tunnels underneath the trenches.

One day Jack received word from his wife Margaret that their young son John had taken ill. He sat that day on a fire step drinking tea, regaining strength after six hours underground, and his thoughts turned toward home.

Eight years earlier, when his wife had given birth to a son, Jack's life had changed. As the child grew, Jack noticed in him some quality which surprised him. The child was not worn down. In his innocence there was a kind of hope. Margaret laughed when Jack pointed this out to her. "He's only two years old," she said, "Of course he's innocent."

That was not what Jack had meant, but he could not put into words the effect that watching John had on him. He saw him as a creature who had come from another universe; but in Jack's eyes the place from which the boy had come was not just a different, but a better world. His innocence was not the same thing as ignorance; it was a powerful quality of goodness that was available to all people.

It seemed to Jack that if an ordinary human being, his own son, could have this purity of mind, then perhaps the isolated deeds of virtue at which people marveled in later life, were not really isolated at all; perhaps they were the natural continuation of the goodness that all brought into the world at their birth. If this was true, then his fellow-human beings were not the rough, flawed creatures that most of them supposed. This love Jack felt toward his son redeemed his view of human life and gave substance to his faith in God. His piety was transformed into something that expressed his belief in the goodness of humanity. (Faulkes, 1993)

I've never thought of Christmas as a test of faith in quite the same way as I have this year. It is a challenging task to sing songs of joy as we try to imagine what Christmas means for all those whose lives have been turned upside down this year. Those whose loved ones were taken by COVID, including some children, those who have lost their livelihoods, those whose patience wore thin and who lashed out in frustration. There are others who have had to bury loved ones in this season that celebrates a birth and new life.

It is a challenge not only here, but around the world, in places too many hold in our hearts.

But in many ways, it has always been so.

Christmas comes each year, no matter what transpired in the months since we last sang the same songs and listened to the same stories and sent cards with the same message of hope for peace and goodwill. Surely we must ask ourselves, why?

In part, we celebrate Christmas because it's what we do, and, as they say, not that there's anything wrong with that. Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German pastor writing from a prison cell in Nazi Germany, affirmed the importance of tradition, he wrote:

*It is not till times such as these that we realize what it means to possess a spiritual inheritance independent of changes of time and circumstance. The consciousness of being borne up by a spiritual tradition that goes back for centuries can give one a feeling of confidence in the face of all passing strains and stresses. Anyone who is aware of such reserves of strength need not be ashamed of more tender feelings evoked by the memory of a rich and noble past, for in my opinion they belong to a better and nobler part of humankind.” (Bonhoeffer)*

My friends, it isn't just our traditions that belong to a noble part of humankind. You belong to that nobility, too. You are not merely the rough, flawed creature you know yourself to be. What we celebrate tonight is the essential goodness of our humanity.

When God chose to reveal the fullness of divine love to humankind, God chose to live a human life. That life that began as all our lives began, in innocence and vulnerability. The child was born into a world ill-prepared to receive it, as was more true of our own births than we may realize. The child was born into circumstances he could not control, nor fully understand, as were all of us born into this world of pain and splendor. The child was born to show us the face of God, the same face reflected in all those created in God's image.

So, tonight we sing songs of hope again so that we don't forget what we hope for, and we tell our sacred stories again so that we don't forget who we are, and what we are here on this earth to do. To be a follower of Jesus means to persist in hope and strive to become that for which we hope.

If there is one message to be gleaned from all our efforts to celebrate Christmas this COVID year in spite of our shortcomings, it is the audacious affirmation that in the face of all evidence to the contrary, we possess goodness. Each one of us has imprinted on our soul the image of God, and we have the capacity to carry God's hope and love to places where hope and love are most needed.

It's often said that with the birth of each child comes the message that God has not yet given up on humankind. The birth of Christ, our birth, the birth of all those who came before and who will come after of us—all bring the message that God has not given up hope. We are God's hope, God's image, God's light.

And so this Christmas, hold fast to what is good. Refuse to accept that the way things seem now is how they will always be. We won't always live in a world where it is dangerous to hug your loved ones, or where children are hungry because of their

parents lost their jobs. Dare to hope and believe that we can live from our essential goodness and bring about the change we seek.

For we are a noble people, the ones to whom and in whom God is born.

Amen.