

Sermons from Park Hill: Christmas Eve 2007

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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**Christmas Eve
“A Knock at Midnight”**

When someone knocks on your door at midnight, it's hardly ever a good thing. I tried to imagine what that might be – a good knock at midnight. Perhaps a friend travelling through town during the night who says, “I couldn't just drive by without stopping.” My brother Gary is a truck driver. A few years ago he regularly drove across the country. A couple of times he passed through Cleveland on his way from North Dakota to Boston or Philadelphia. But, he never stopped or called because it was always in the middle of the night. I told him he should anyway; I hardly ever got to see him. But, he said, “You never want a phone call at midnight.”

Most of the time, when someone knocks or calls during the night, it's about a tragedy. Something terrible has happened. “Wake up and help,” comes the cry. Our reluctance to answer often comes on top of a long, difficult day. Sometimes, however, we're surprised. My church in Cleveland was on a major street

and we got our share of people stopping by to ask for assistance. I'll admit I didn't always welcome these interruptions.

I had a beautiful window next to my desk so one day I watched as another person approached the door. I had seen him at our free meals. I groaned to myself, sure that he wanted something. My assistant ushered him in and I welcomed him to take a seat, but he just wanted to drop something off. He handed me a check for \$11,000. He wasn't a member, but he knew the church did good things in the neighborhood. I was so embarrassed that I had resented the imposition of his presence at my door. We all come to the church asking for something. In fact, the church's biggest problem is when people stop knocking at our door because they believe the church has nothing to offer.

The title of my sermon comes directly from Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote a powerful sermon 40 years ago called A Knock at Midnight.¹ He based it on the parable in Luke of the friend who goes to his neighbor in the middle of the night for three loaves of bread to serve a surprise traveller. The friend responds, “don't bother me. I've gone to bed and locked the door.” (Luke 11: 5-6)

Is that also the response of the church? Dr. King said it is midnight in our world, midnight in the moral order. I'm always shocked at how contemporary his 40 year old illustrations are. As an example of his point, he wrote a prophetic indictment on what is often modern Christianity: “It is permissible even to hate if one so dresses his hating in the garments of love – that hating appears to be loving.”

I've heard “love the sinner, hate the sin” enough times to know exactly what he is

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saying. He marvels that anyone even darkens the door of the church anymore, given how disappointing its response to the midnight needs of the world often are. "What," he said, "more pathetically reveals the irrelevancy of the church in its present-day world affairs than its witness regarding war?" This, 40 years ago.

If you are not familiar with the parable of the friend at midnight, you might not know that the neighbor does indeed get up and give three loaves of bread – but only after the persistence of the friend. By his persistence, his needs on behalf of the travelling friend are met, just as Mary and Joseph are given a place to rest. Dr. King said that, "many continue to knock on the door of the church at midnight, even after the church has so bitterly disappointed them, because they know the bread of life is there." And it's true. Even when we fail, God is there working through our stumbling.

We are *all* here because we need something – we need to be loved, to belong, we need hope, we need guidance, we need our children to have a spiritual foundation and give them a moral view not shaped entirely by Nikolodian. Each of us needs something. The great irony of the church is that our need is only addressed when we seek to meet the needs of someone else. Crazy how that works... And we can resent the persistence of that message.

But if the church is ever failing, and it does, it is because we don't want to "impose" expectations upon each other. Yet, the most meaningful thing we can do is expect great things of each other.

Dr. King said, "If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.

If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause people everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo and...will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of humankind and fire the souls of men and women, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth... People far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight."

Wow. That's the kind of mission we claim as our own. Of course, it has to be a mission that is claimed in every generation. Regardless of the cost, we must continue to be persistent.

Well, it's almost midnight. Mary and Joseph have just wearily arrived in town. The innkeeper has already turned on the no-vacancy sign and gone to bed. But Jesus said, "Seek and ye shall find; knock and the door shall be opened unto you." The weary innkeeper, tired from all the guests that have already come to town, responds one more time and is surprised by what is at her door.

So how do we know which midnight knock will bring welcome guests and which ones announce tragedy? Is it ever that simple? If we were to open the door because we thought Mary was coming to deliver the lovely baby Jesus in our living room, we might be surprised that it's the adult Christ at the door waiting to change us and challenge us. Such a visit is not a tragedy, unless we are among the powerful elite sitting on our thrones with banquet tables overflowing with food for ourselves. It's not a tragedy unless we think that we have no

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responsibility in a world in which we are among the most privileged.

The midnight birth of Jesus was mixed news – a wake up call for the world as it lay in stillness that night. When the powerful rulers of the state and the religious leaders woke up on their comfortable silk sheets, they would soon find out that their unusual dream was really a nightmare.

Before his birth, Mary had already proclaimed: through this child God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

It has happened, and tonight we celebrate that news. The birth of Jesus, coming as a midnight knock at the Bethlehem inn and as a midnight knock in 2007, brings a message of hope and trembling. But it is all good news. It is hope for a world living in the darkness of war and poverty; it is a message of liberation for the rich and powerful; it is joy for us because we know we are not alone. When we knock, the door has already been opened. We may be surprised by who is knocking at our door, but in whatever form, may the dear Christ enter in.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Warner Books, 1998.