

“Spiritual Due Dates”
Luke 2:1-7 (The Birth of Jesus.)
Christmas Eve 9:00 p.m. Worship, 2011

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Christmas Eve, 9:00 p.m. 2011
Redlands First United Methodist Church

Some of us here have “Due Dates” coming up. Some brand new children are about to enter the world. Of course “due dates” do not apply only to births of infants, but also to things like bills, rent, and--if you’ve recently applied for college financial aid--“FAFSA” forms. We even say that rain is due; trains and planes are due to arrive.

Here’s a question for you: What’s the difference between a “due date” and a “dead line”?

By asking myself that question, I’ve learned more than I expected about “deadlines.” The word originated with newspapers. If a reporter did not complete a local news story, (for example, about a robbery) by the time the newspaper was to be printed, the *story* was considered “dead.” It became old “news.” Hence, a deadline.

Due dates of course create a different **mood**. They suggest expectations. Consider what happens when a due date *arrives*. Something is born. Clearly, when the due date for a birth arrives, a baby is born. When we pay the rent that’s due, a month of apartment space is born for us.

Yet, think about it, after a *deadline*, something is *no longer expected*.

With such different **moods** and **implications** surrounding due dates and deadlines, it is quite interesting that *we tend to use the two almost interchangeably*.

For example, I might consider that I have a *deadline* for a sermon. Whether my deadline is noon on Saturday or 9 AM Sunday morning is debatable, but the sermon must happen. I’m not sure *what* would be dead, if I arrived without a sermon. Realizing that I would not be “dead,” if I did not have a sermon, helped me at one point a couple years ago to change my attitude toward sermon’s having *deadlines*. I decided, instead, that sermons have *due dates*. This means that I give birth most Sundays! That’s a challenging thought, but it creates in me a *far more enjoyable mood* in the preparation time than fearing that *something* would die, if I’m not ready. Do you sense the difference? I’d suggest this change of phrases for you, too, if you’ve often been dreading “deadlines.”

Even if we *say* our homework is due or projects are due, many of *us work as if* we have a deadline, not a due date. We focus upon the *fearful* consequence of the *line in time* rather than the upcoming *birth* of accomplishment.

Jesus the Christ was definitely due upon this Earth. Jewish people had expected a messiah for centuries. I don’t know if God met God’s due date, but many more people than Mary and Joseph sure anticipated this birth.

We might say “It was about time” that Jesus came, the Messiah that was expected to usher in a more sensible human existence, one that would be organized around Love and cooperation, not war or hatred.

This “due date” and “deadline” distinction may be more interesting and even more important than we at first realize.

In my exploring the term “deadline,” I learned something that relates to the grown-up message of Jesus the Christ. There’s a second meaning to the expression, “Deadline,” and it has nothing to do with *time*. This second meaning of “deadline” has to do with *space, location*.

There was an “infamous” Confederate prison camp in Andersonville where an actual line on the ground was called the “deadline.” It was marked 17 feet from the prison camp fence. Guards immediately shot any prisoner who crossed that line.

I was not going to mention this meaning of “deadline,” especially on Christmas Eve, for it seemed irrelevant and even gruesome. However, this meaning for deadline kept tugging at me. **I realized that this way of thinking about *space* actually has a magnificent Christmas message within it.**

*While Jesus **the baby** came at a time in history, a “due date,” the Christ, **grown up**, actually altered our concept of space, of lines in the ground, of fences.*

One of the very reasons Christ was so *due* was that we humans needed—and still need—spiritual guidance that encourages us to step across artificial lines that we humans put up between ourselves.

For example, all three times John and I were looking for homes: when we moved to Dayton, Ohio, then to Orange County, and finally to Redlands, our realtors informed us which “side of town” to live on. We chose to live really close to work in each place, which meant, while in Dayton, that we lived on the wrong side of the “line” many people held in their heads. We lived on the wrong side of that line for 21 **wonderful** years.

The baby born and lain in a manger on Christmas morning, when he grew up and began his ministry, was relentless in prodding people to step across all sorts of artificial lines. He showed his disciples *how* to take down fences.

My seasonal reflection leads me to suggest that we transform *deadlines* that give us stress—even the deadline of Christmas itself—into *due dates* that offer life and vitality. Even more, I suggest we Christmas people actively let go of some *spatial* “deadlines” that keep us imprisoned by unfounded or outdated assumptions about others.

It’s not just that we can cross a line to understand Muslims or Buddhists. This Christmas we can accept the Gift of Christ to cross *any* line that has kept us at a distance even from some “peculiar” relative—whether that relative is across town or in our own home.

This Christmas I hope that Christ is born for the 2000^{th-something} time, born not just in our nativity pageants, but truly deeply born into millions of hearts, even our own hearts, so that we go *emotionally and spiritually*, as well as physically, to *spaces and places* that help us to experience others (and ourselves) in a new light, with the same optimism of the Prince of Peace. Let us follow in this Long-Awaited One’s footsteps—*wherever* those footprints lead us. Merry, Merry Christmas.