

**Christmas Eve
December 24, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation ... the One who brought us into being
The God alive in each of us ... as God was alive in Jesus
And the power of God known in the Spirit ... the Spirit who blessed Mary with God's Son.
Amen.**

The Feast of the Incarnation. The Nativity of Our Lord. The birth of Jesus ... the Christ child. Christmas. It is the gift of God's Son to the world, the divine presence of God coming alive in human form. It is God's blessing upon us so that we, too, might be a blessing in return to God's world. What a glorious night, in spite of our isolation from one another during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Our First Lesson this evening opens with these words:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness,
on them light has shined.
(Isaiah 9:2)*

Not for a long time, have these words of Isaiah fallen on our ears as significantly as they do this Christmas. For months, we have strained our eyes in search of even a glimmer of hope. The combined pandemics of COVID-19, racial injustice, and political animosity have conspired to obscure our vision of a safe, stable, and just future for our world ... and for us in it. These events have made us starkly aware of what Isaiah called this world's yokes of burden ... illness, poverty, inequality, and oppression. This year has presented us with an absence of light that, ironically, has itself illuminated the physical, emotional, and spiritual healing necessary for the wholeness and holiness of the world around us.

Every Christmas we hear these same lessons from Isaiah, Titus, and the Gospel of Luke. Most of us grew up hearing the story of the birth of Jesus read to us as children, and we saw depictions of the story in art, and holiday cards and manger scenes on our mantles. The stable with the animals, the angels and the shepherds, the stars in the heaven. And, we sang songs that told us how peaceful and serene the event was. The story of the birth of Jesus is so very familiar to us that we sometimes have a tendency to not listen as closely to the story as we would if we were hearing it for the first time. The temptation for me is to preach to that sentimentality and avoid the darkness. However, to do so would be to deny the power of both the darkness in our lives, and the light of the Incarnation.

The Prophet Isaiah is telling us that the light of God can pierce our darkness just as it did when Jesus was born ... that the story in Luke's gospel is not just about the birth of the baby Jesus, it is about a light shining in the darkness. And, it is not just about an event 2,000 years ago ... it is

about the light that is available to us in the darkness that surrounds us today ... the collective darkness in our society, and the individual darkness that many of us are feeling in our personal world.

The extraordinary “Great Conjunction” of Jupiter and Saturn this week ... on the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year ... feels an apt metaphor of the light for which we yearn. I think we are all seeking something brighter than usual in this year when we have walked through unexpected darkness of many sorts. Some imagine that the star the Magi ... the Three Wise Men ... followed after the birth of Jesus was a similar conjunction of two planets ... yet, the star of the Nativity was not the true light of the world, rather it pointed to it, and directed the way.

As poignant and sentimental as the story in Luke’s gospel is, there is a lot that is written between the lines ... a lot that often goes unmentioned. The author of Luke’s gospel wrote:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

“When Quirinius was governor of Syria.” The Syria of today is in the midst of a decade long civil war. With the help of Russian fighter jets, Bashar al-Assad has indiscriminately bombed his own people including those in hospitals and orphanages ... killing civilians as well as rebels, and over five hundred thousand persons have died in the hostilities. The country has been ravaged by this war, and as many as five million refugees have fled to the relative safety of other nations.

Two thousand years ago, when Augustus was Emperor of the Roman Empire he also ruled by brutal force. And Quirinius, governor of Syria, was a heartless tyrant of the same stripe as Bashar al-Assad. So, when those first Christians heard Luke’s version of the birth of Jesus, they were immediately reminded of just how dark the world was during that time.

Today we live in a divided world ... a divided world that for many looks a lot like darkness. You have heard me quote Loren Mead before: “The world is divided into two kinds of people; the kind of people that divide the world into two kinds of people, and those that don’t.” Today it feels like there are more and more people dividing the world into two kinds of people. They divide the world into “us” and “them” ... those that “have” and those that “don’t have” ... those who are “in” and those who are “out” ... those who are “welcomed” and those who are “excluded.”

Yet, that is not too different from a world that was oppressed by an occupying Roman army. A world where people were forced to pay exorbitant taxes just to support that elitist patronage government. A world where refugees were told to go sleep in the barn ... even when the pregnant mother was due to give birth to her baby at any moment ... rather than give up a precious room that was collecting a pricey rent. This was a world where those who disagreed with the powers-that-be were crucified and hung to die along the roadside ... not just as punishment for their rebellion, but as a warning to all those who traveled those roads that they could be next if they challenge the establishment.

Between the lines in the story from Luke's gospel is the backstory that sets the stage ... it was a very dark time in the world in which Jesus was born. But that is not the end of the story ... it was not the end of the story then, and it is not the end of the story now.

The prophet Isaiah gives us a clue. Writing some 600 years before Jesus was born he said:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness,
on them light has shined.*

This baby whose birth we celebrate tonight holds the power of the same light that split the world in Genesis. Jesus has come to cut the darkness ... to put boundaries on it ... to proclaim light and life and freedom and justice and wholeness for the oppressed and the banished and the forsaken and despised, for the marginalized, and for those who had stumbled and fallen to the bottom of the social and economic ladder.

The fact is that into that darkness a light was born ... 2,000 years ago in Jesus ... and today in each one of us who is willing to carry that light.

The author of Luke's gospel continued the story:

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Notice that Jesus was born at night ... when it was dark. I think the author of Luke's gospel was trying to tell us something. In that darkness ... like the darkness we have come to know this past year ... an angel came to some shepherds and the "glory of the Lord shone round them." If any of those shepherds were asleep before the angel appeared, I imagine they woke up real fast. That is what this story is about ... not just about a baby being born in a stable with donkeys and sheep and cows looking on. It is about the Incarnation ... God coming alive in human form ... light coming into the world like the first light in Genesis. It happened 2,000 years ago and it happens today when you and I become that light. That light wakes us up and brings us into consciousness of the injustice all around us ... the institutional and structural racism ... the inequities of our medical system ... the lack of gender equality ... an economy that relegates a huge segment of our world to poverty.

To celebrate Christmas ... the Feast of the Incarnation ... in a world of darkness ... the light comes and wakes us up, it comes and gives us hope, and it comes calling us to act. This hope is not naive, and this hope is not an opiate. This hope may be the single greatest act of defiance we have against a culture of pessimism and despair. This kind of hope lifts us out of the vessel that holds us and says, "You can dream ... you can think outside the box ... you can be creative ...

you can be more than what you think you can be ... you can be generous in spirit. Hope means that others do not define you ... those others out there ... and those others with voices in your own head.

When we take seriously what Jesus took seriously then we welcome the stranger ... the immigrant ... the refugee. We include those who have been marginalized and forsaken and ignored and excluded. We give voice to those who are speechless by speaking out against misogyny and racism and xenophobia. We give food to sustain the body and food to nourish the soul. We quench the thirst of those seeking justice and fairness. We open our ears to hear the pleas of those in pain instead of turning our backs on those who are ill and hurting. We bring healing by not only finding ways for all person to access medical resources, but by also just being with the one who is ill. These are the things that Jesus took seriously. This is the light that was born on Christmas. This is the light that can overcome darkness ... then and now.

If a hay trough in a livestock stable 2,000 years ago was worthy of receiving the God of all creation, then surely your heart and my heart are worthy as well. I pray this Christmas that, following Mary, Joseph, the angels, and the shepherds, we might open our hearts to the love ... both infinitely powerful and infinitely vulnerable ... that took on flesh in the infant Jesus, to the end that, through us, fear might be met with faith and courage ... violence disarmed by charity and generosity of spirit ... power leavened by mercy and compassion ... poverty overwhelmed by kindness ... self-interest dismantled by self-sacrifice ... and desperation replaced with hope.

This is Christmas. This is the Feast of the Incarnation. This is God coming alive in this world in the embodiment of Jesus. This is the light in the darkness ... then and now. As God was alive in Jesus so God can be alive in each of us. We are then the light. That is what it means to really celebrate Christmas. If God can be come alive in human form in a baby born in a stable, then God can certainly come alive in each of us. This is how to celebrate the Incarnation.

In this blessed season of new light, I give thanks for each of you, and for all that you do to illuminate the love of God ... bringing light to the world ... incarnated in the birth of Jesus. In Jesus, you, too, are the light of the world, and the darkness can and will never overcome you.

*May the humility of the shepherds,
the joy of the angels,
and the peace of the Christ-child
be God's gift to you this Christmas time and always.*

Amen.