

**2 Christmas
January 2, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Welcome to 2022! Happy New Year! I sincerely wish I could say that with more enthusiasm, but Happy New Year. Under the present circumstances it feels like an ominous beginning to a very consequential year.

I have Good News, and I have Bad News. The Bad News is that we have had to suspend in-person worship because of the highly contagious Omicron variant of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The Bad News is that it looks like this pandemic will get worse before it gets better. The Bad News is that it keeps hitting closer and closer to home for many of us who have tried to do everything right ... masks, social distancing, vaccinations, booster shots. Yet, this coronavirus is relentless.

It is not just the disease itself, but the overarching stress that has permeated our lives. Constant vigilance, unyielding anxiety, and ever-present fear is wearing us down ... at least it is for me. I find myself at times being emotionally fragile. Once again, we are isolated from each other. Our community of faith cannot gather in this sacred space. This is indeed Bad News.

Yet there is Good News. That is what "Gospel" means ... Good News. The Good News is that this Omicron variant doesn't seem to be as potent as the Delta variant. The Omicron variant causes people to be sick ... but just not as sick ... especially for those of us who have been vaccinated and boosted. The Good News is that we have navigated these waters before. The Good News is that "church" is not just what happens in this building ... it is the connection that we all have to each other through our faith in a loving God. The Good News is that we are not the first generation of people of faith to face these challenges ... our Bible is full of stories of our spiritual ancestors facing a more dangerous world with much higher consequences. The Good News was and is that God was with our spiritual ancestors then ... and God is with us now.

Today is the Ninth Day of our Christmas season, the Second Sunday of Christmas. Some years we only have one Sunday during these twelve days of our Christmas season, but this year we have two. The Gospel readings in this season have moved from the birth of Jesus in a stable with the manger, and angels and shepherds of Luke's gospel on Christmas Eve; and the "Word" ... the "Logos" ... of John's gospel on the Sunday after Christmas; to the story contained in Matthew's gospel that we heard read this morning. You would not necessarily know this, but there are actually three options for the gospel reading this morning ... the story of Joseph's dream in Matthew's gospel ... the story of Jesus at his bar mitzvah in the Temple at Jerusalem in Luke's gospel ... and then the story of the wise men in Matthew's gospel. These stories from

Matthew's gospel are an example ... at least for me ... of people facing challenges in their time ... stories that just might give us comfort and encouragement in our time.

Matthew tells us of the magi ... the Wise Men from the East ... who pay tribute to the baby Jesus. What would a nativity scene be without the Wise Men joining the angels and shepherds at the manger? Yet, that is a blending of two separate stories, and the one in Matthew's gospel has a rather sinister twist.

When the magi showed up on the doorstep of the King of Israel looking for the infant child who was destined to be the "King of the Jews," Herod saw his power threatened and sought to destroy the baby Jesus. After honoring the Holy Family with rich gifts these astrologers were "warned by God in a dream" not to return to Herod. The magi ... these Wise Men ... showed their wisdom and went back to their home "by another way" ... another way that did not include reporting to Herod as he had commanded them to do. This is the story from the first part of what I read this morning.

But ... as we heard in this morning's reading ... the very next verse of Matthew's gospel tells us that the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. This was the same angel that had come to Joseph telling him Mary was with child ... the angel of Joseph's annunciation ... and this time the angel warned Joseph to take Mary and the child, Jesus, and flee to the safety of Egypt and therefore escape the wrath of Herod.

When Herod realized that the magi had disobeyed his orders he was enraged. In his anger he ordered the "Slaughter of the Innocents." This portion of the story is not included in this morning's reading ... verses 16, 17, and 18 ... it was probably deemed too violent for Sunday family worship. But Herod demanded that every male child two years or under living in the environs of Bethlehem be put to death. In a classic tactic of tyrants, Herod had responded to the threat against his power with indiscriminate killing ... the collateral damage was high and yet the specific one targeted, Jesus, had escaped.

This was the world into which Jesus was born. And this is the world into which Jesus would be born if he were to come back today. The tyrants of our world today are just as brutal as they were two thousand years ago. Jesus was born under a tyrant who tried to kill him. Thirty years later Jesus died on a cross at the hand of another tyrant.

In his life and ministry Jesus taught of what he called the "Kingdom of God." He included at his table those who were outcast and marginalized. He offered healing to those who were lame, sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf. He wept with the grieving, and shared what little he had with the poor. In his parables he turned the world upside-down. He ridiculed unjust judges, insincere religious leaders, and stingy people of wealth. He exalted the poor who were generous, the sinners who prayed, and the meek who sought justice through peaceful means. Why wouldn't an oppressive tyrant like Herod be threatened? Jesus was calling the powerful to use their authority for the **common** good, not just their own benefit and security. Jesus believed **all** should have enough to eat, that everyone deserved shelter from the elements, that

justice was based on what was “**right**” not on how deep one’s pockets were. Jesus demanded equity, and he practiced equality. Of course, a tyrant would be threatened, and the tyrants of today still are.

The world we live in today is filled with tyrants who have unimaginable resources to destroy life on this planet. Kim Jung Un of North Korea, Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, Xi Jinping of China, and Bashar Al-Assad of Syria, are just a few of the world dictators who are more interested in their own power than in the needs of the people of the nations they lead. They silence journalist, torture activists, imprison naysayers, and outright kill their opposition to stay in power. And they threaten other nations that condemn their actions.

In this country, gun violence ... some involving the police ... is a slaughter of innocents. In this country were over twenty thousand deaths by firearms in 2021. There were six hundred eighty one mass shootings ... any incident of gun violence in which four or more people were shot. Over seventeen million guns were sold last year. The fear of gun violence ... and the argument over whether to respond by limiting access to guns, or to arm more civilians ... is a tyranny that this nation lives with daily.

Regardless of where one stands in relationship to the issue of climate change, it is certainly clear that this past year has been tragic for many. From the freeze in Texas at the beginning of 2021, to the wildfires in Colorado just this week ... with Gulf Coast hurricanes and December tornadoes in between ... this nation has lived under an ever-present threat of a severe weather event almost constantly. This is also a tyranny of sorts. The chronic fear and anxiety of what the world will look like for our grandchildren ... and their grandchildren ... pits the plight of the masses against the power of a wealthy few.

Someone asked me recently, “Why would God allow all these things to happen?” Personally, I don’t think God “allows” them to happen. I imagine God thinking, “When are they going to start understanding that actions ... and inaction ... has consequences for the world people live in. All these people need to do is acknowledge that we are all in the same boat ... and it is taking on water.”

And, this is not just about the world out there ... it is also about the world in our own homes and families. In the midst of this worship this morning we will offer our prayers for the healing of those who are ill. Our prayer list is punctuated with the names of those who are a part of this community, and those known to the members of this congregation, who are living with cancer, recovering from surgery, facing life-threatening diseases, or who are sick from one form of the coronavirus or another. Right here in our midst this tyrant condemns innocents to a slaughter of what we call “natural causes,” yet the fear it engenders speaks to a power that permeates our world today.

So, how do to respond to these tyrannies? How do we make sense out of a global pandemic, extraordinary violence against innocent people, weather events that seem so incomprehensible? Is there anything we can do to make a difference? And what do we do with

all the questions that are raised, the uncertainty we face, and the fear that is still permeating our lives? What can we do to respond to these and all the other tyrannies and tragedies of the world to which we feel so helpless?

I would like to be able to offer some comfortable words from the gospel. I would like to think that we might find some consolation in the teachings of Jesus. However, I believe that what we find is more of a challenge than a comfort. People around the world live under the oppression of tyranny of one kind or another. Whether it be international terrorism, or a “natural” event that wipes out a whole neighborhood, or the home-front terrorism of a deadly disease, it nonetheless provokes a tyranny of fear. Yet, amid that fear there are persons who respond to those caught in its grasp with compassion. The key word here is “compassion” ... literally, to “suffer with.” Our consolation at times like this is in the shared pain we feel with those directly impacted by fear, and it is not comfortable. Jesus wept with those who grieved, just as we weep with those who suffer around the world, and in our own community. Each tear we shed is a prayer of shared pain with another who is living in the real suffering of loss, or fear, or illness.

The uncomfortable challenge is that to make a real difference in the life of others in the world we must have and show deep and functional compassion. If we have those tears, then we must be willing to “suffer with” which means to go beyond just sympathetic tears to acts of sacrificial generosity.

In this season of the Incarnation we are called to do no less than to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus connected himself to those who were at the edge of society. He told the crowds to mourn for those who mourn. Grieve for those who have lost their sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sister and brothers. Cry for those who no longer have a home, or food to eat, or clean water to drink. Shed a tear for those who have lost all means of providing support for a family. Open your hearts now, and forever more, to those who suffer from natural and human-caused tragedies ... the tyranny of fear.

Let meekness and humility be your hallmark, taught Jesus who went to John to be baptized. Know that we are not God ... not as individuals, nor as a nation. We do not need to dominate the rest of the world by force. Be peacemakers, taught Jesus. Refuse to make havoc in the name of liberation. Refuse to make war as a so-called weapon of peace. Instead, said Jesus, be pure of heart. Act without guile ... without greed. Be merciful, said Jesus who ate with the outcast of his society. For those that are weaker, poorer, simpler than you, demand a fair world. Seek equity and practice equality.

Finally, during a pandemic ... in the face of the tragedies of nature ... and the tragedies of tyrants ... when we feel most impotent to help those who suffer the most, Jesus says to be still in your own heart. Be still in your own heart and the world around you will be still also. My faith is one that believes that when any of us are wounded, God feels the pain. God’s heart is broken by the tragedies of this world ... we see that in the actions of God’s son, Jesus. If we really believe that God came alive in Jesus, and God can come alive in us, then we are called to

help heal the wound felt in the heart of God as we live into the gift God gave us in the Incarnation.

In a world beset by tyrants, tyrannies and tragedies we are perplexed, and in our confusion, we often feel hopeless, frightened, and impotent. We suffer with those who are suffering the deepest. In that suffering we are all connected, one to another, as children of God. It gives us the opportunity to see this world as one unit ... God's world ... and the people suffering halfway around the world as our brothers and sisters, just as are the people in our own backyard.

The angel came to Joseph in a dream to warn him of Herod's plan to kill Jesus. Jesus was born into a world of tyranny ... an oppressive government that wielded power to indulge a few at the expense of many. Jesus brought God into the world to transform that tyranny. Jesus was killed at the hands of a tyrant, but the story did not end there. The Resurrection tells us that the tyranny of the world cannot stop God. At its weakest moments the world cries out for us to see each other as one huge family ... when one of us is wounded, all of us are wounded. And in those wounds God is present. This is the Good News. It was Good News then ... and it is Good News today.

The Incarnation tells us that God is present in each of us as we live with compassion for those who suffer. Let that compassion not end with the next news story. Let that compassion root in our hearts and souls to transform us, as individuals and as a nation, into the image of God.

I close with a poem by the great African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader Howard Thurman. It is called ***The Work of Christmas:***

When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes have gone home
When the shepherds are back with their flock
That is when the work of Christmas begins
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoners
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace to us all
To make music in the heart.

Amen.