

**Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2019**

**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.**

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.

I taught mathematics at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga before going to seminary. One of my student's family own a local tourist attraction, Ruby Falls. The student arranged a private tour of the enormous caverns where there was an underground waterfall for which the attraction was named. Deep inside the cave he showed just how dark "darkness" was by shutting off all the lights. You could not see your hand in front of your face. Then, an assistant lit a candle in the middle of this huge cave ... and the small flame filled the cavernous room with light.

In many ways that is the story we just heard read ... it 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 whatever darkness that surrounds us today. If God could come alive in human form in a baby born in a smelly stable, then surely God can come alive in each of us. The light of God can pierce our darkness just as it did when Jesus was born.

Yet, as poignant as the story in Luke's gospel is, there is a lot that is written between the lines ... a lot that often goes unmentioned.

*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 ruled by the brutal dictator, Bashar al-Assad. 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 ... leaving devastation throughout his country ... and causing refugees to flee 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 ilk 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 "us and them" ... those that "have" and those that "don't have" ... those who are "in" and those who are "out" ... those who are to be "included" and those who are to be "expelled."

But 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 if the pregnant mother's baby was due at any moment ... rather than give up a precious room that was collecting a nice 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 stepped out of line.

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 ... not then, and not 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.*

In the Hebrew Creation story darkness ... desolation, death, and destruction ... surrounded the world. The spirit of God entered the darkness and hovered over the deep. God spoke: "Let there be light!" and there was light, and God saw that it was good. And light cut the darkness. God had broken through the dark places with the brightness of a new Creation.

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 banished and those at 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.

*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.*

The story in Luke's gospel has Jesus being 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 no darkness that any of us can imagine ... and 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 hay-filled feeding trough with chickens and 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 brings us into consciousness of the injustice all around us ... the institutional and structural racism ... the lack of gender equality ... an economic system which 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 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 disenfranchised 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 nourish the body and 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.

The incarnation of Jesus is for us one of the great and overt expressions of God's desire for intimacy and reconciliation with all of creation. It is by Jesus' birth, 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, and today in each of us, that the divine intention of universal justice, mercy, and peace comes to life. In the nativity of Jesus, we are challenged to become new ourselves, transformed and empowered by God's own spirit of holiness to be agents of the Holy ... vehicles through which the world might be healed and made whole.

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 mine 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. This is how to celebrate Christmas.

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

Amen.