

# *St James United Church*

## Message for December 24, 2021 Christmas Eve



"The True Christmas"

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-4 and 7; Luke 2:1-19; "Earth and Heaven" by Susan Palo Cherwien

After the restricted holiday Glen and I had last year in Ontario, with pre-recorded services, an us and dad only gathering, and Zoom calls to siblings, I was looking forward to our first Christmas in Newfoundland. But now it is more of the same. I am sure that you too are finding it difficult to muster much joy. Instead, it all feels quite sobering, especially when during the Wednesday press conference our provincial officials kept referring to two years regarding the pandemic. For some reason I found the talk of years rather than months to reassuring as well as sobering. It highlights for me why many of us feel at a breaking point, yet manage to find strength and resolve as well.

I realize all of that doesn't feel very Christmasy, but what is Christmas supposed to be anyway? Does it need to be bright lights, festive songs and sweet treats shared with family and friends? As we heard in the biblical narrative it feels just the opposite. It mostly seems to happen at night, or at least under shadow, like they are living out the words of Isaiah's prophecy. Mary and Joseph went on an arduous journey to Bethlehem to be registered for a tax being raised by a foreign power, one who'd ruled over them via a puppet king for nearly forty years. After she gave birth and the baby was placed in a manger, angels appeared in the night to shepherds. They told them not to be afraid but they were, and for more than the shock of an apparition. They were landless after years of cruelty under Herod, and knew from neighbours under direct occupation by Rome that it could get much worse. Fear was the right response, for Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds.

I know this too doesn't sound Christmasy and isn't that the point? I heard a colleague wisely remark that when we look at stories in the Bible, God "intervenes" in times of hardship, of crisis be it calling Moses to rescue the people from slavery, or offering words of consolation through prophets when they were in exile. In today's celebration, we honour how in another moment of crisis, God again "intervened" but in a way never expected. God in Jesus, born in poverty and laid in a manger, is God as vulnerable rather than almighty, become one of us, and in the process letting us know that we are deeply loved, not despite being afraid and unsure, but precisely because that is how we feel. In Jesus, God is as close as our heartbeat, loving us in our greatest need. It's not that God is absent in times of comfort and prosperity. But in times like what we're facing, we are at our most open to God's inspiration, strength and grace, most able to recognize God acting in and through others, giving us hope, present within us with courage needed in sobering times.

Now we don't really know when Jesus was born, but by the fourth century CE, Christians had settled on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. I like celebrating his birth in the darkest time of the year. You see, we're biologically wired to slow down and ponder more when it's darkest. It is a time to dream, seek new understanding, heal. It is also a time to let go. In theological terms, this is called *kenosis*. We use the term about Jesus, how Christ let go of divine glory to be one of us. But in our spiritual lives, it's about letting go of the masks we wear to vulnerably accept our truest selves, to recognize God's presence in us, not "intervening" but ever near to us. Susan Palo Cherwien names it in her poem. Earth and heaven and earth are not joined together just once in Jesus but are always together, the world ever pregnant with spirit, if we open our eyes and hearts to it. As we glimpse both heaven and earth in Jesus, we see the same in us, that we too are God's holy children.

I find this reassuring. It reminds me that we all have the spiritual capacity to not only get through this but together draw on that wisdom to nurture a world that honours how we are all God's holy children. This is why angels told the shepherds not to be afraid. A Saviour was born who'd grow up to show them, and us, a new way to be with each other, rather than the empire of Augustus, a family with compassion, care and equity for all. Jesus died in fidelity to that vision, and invites us to die too, not physically but spiritually, letting go of all that holds us from honouring each other as holy children. As sobering as this time is, I wonder if it's a forced winter, time to let go of old patterns and be innovative as we find a way forward. Through us God "intervenes" as we find ways to nurture a future where everyone knows they're loved, no one needs to feel afraid.

As we mark this Christmas in what I don't want to become a familiar way, may we do so assured that what we celebrate is not bright lights, festive songs and sweet treats, enjoyable as these are, but how in a sobering time God drew near, a Saviour born who joined heaven and earth, holy love present in Jesus and in all of us, held as a family even as we again spend Christmas apart. Amen.