

St James United Church

Message for December 24, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Advent/Morning of Christmas Eve



“A More Hopeful Christmas Story”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Luke 2:1-7

Here we are, on the last Sunday of Advent, which as you know this year is also the morning of Christmas Eve. Because of this I wonder if we can meld the two celebrations together somewhat. We already have in a way as we have just heard 2 Samuel, the first reading for Advent 4 as well as the first half of the gospel that we'll hear tonight. I wonder though if we can take it one step further, and listen again to our gospel but to hear it like an Advent reading. What do I mean by that? Over these weeks we've been waiting with hope and watching for where God is at work. There is a sense of anticipation in this, and I wonder if we can listen with that hopefulness, with less of a rushed quality and more with a thoughtful slowness as the story unfolds. Hear it again. This time I'll read the version you'll hear tonight.

“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. *(pause)* All went to their towns to be registered. *(pause)* Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. *(pause)* He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. *(pause)* While they were there, *(pause)* the time came for her to deliver her child. *(pause)* And she gave birth to her firstborn son *(pause)* and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

Did you notice anything as we slow the story down and wait for it to unfold? What I notice most is how it becomes more loving, inclusive, hopeful. You see we usually add an urgency that isn't in the text. We have Joseph and Mary rushing to Bethlehem, needing to be there right away. The town is overflowing with strangers. It's hostile and unwelcoming. Almost as soon as they arrive, Mary is in labour and forced to have her baby in a cold stable. But none of that is in the text. Yes, they go to be registered, but it would take a while for news of this to get to them and there'd be a time period for it. The Romans are bureaucrats as well as soldiers and so want things done right not necessarily fast. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem because that is where Joseph's family is from, and if we take Matthew's gospel to heart where he's from too, and so they get to visit his family. It's crowded but they're with loved ones, so many in fact the

inn (a guest room) is occupied. So Joseph and Mary sleep on the bottom level where animals are kept, a common building arrangement to keep animals safe, and they were a heat-source for the upper floor. At some point in the visit, Mary goes into labour. They use the manger as a crib, just like people may use a dresser drawer. See, more loving, inclusive, without biases projected onto it, like dirt and damp, uncaring strangers, or a mean innkeeper rejecting a soon to be mom in her time of need.

This opens up the story, creates space for us to see ourselves in it. The way it is often told does the opposite. Mary and Joseph feel lost and alone, with no one to care for them but the animals. It may fit our experience of the world perhaps, but not what God is bringing into being through us, as we have been considering over these last few weeks. This for me is where our 2 Samuel reading helps. King David wants to build a temple to house the ark of the covenant, but God says through Nathan that a tent suits God, preferring to be in the thick of it with the people. We hear this in John's Prologue. In English we read "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us, but the Greek suggests that "the Word set up a tent." This is God on the move, part of our lives no matter where we are or what's going on. I hear this in the promise God makes to David. His descendants will remain on the throne. In a sense it's Jesus, but it's also a promise of God's blessing through people, given from one generation to the next.

That is what we have been reflecting on in these weeks, how God is with us, working through us as we respond to the needs of our world, God-with-us in a moment in time, of course, but also through the love that we share, present to enable us to see what we need to change both in our personal lives and the world around us if we are to express the relationships of love and compassion and mutual support that are the heart of God's Reign. We draw near to Jesus born in Bethlehem to help us to live into that. Did you know that Bethlehem means House of Bread. It's no coincidence then Jesus is called the Bread of Life. In this he's our companion, meaning someone to share bread with. He calls us to share the bread of communion, to share wine too, to help us grow in him and be not only companions with him but companions with each other, a community bearing his love in the world, sharing the same presence of mercy and love that we experience at this table.

That's the heart of what we affirm in this Advent meets Christmas celebration. We give thanks to God for Jesus' birth in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, but he is born not only all those years ago but is born in us now, and through us into the future. In this Steve Garnaas-Holmes expresses it best: "The great paradox of Advent is that we await the coming of the One Who Is Among Us, here already, profoundly present, yet still coming... unfolding among us, within us." On this day, this evening too, in these next weeks of Christmas and years to come, may we bear his presence, may we be his presence this Advent-Christmas and from one generation to the next. Amen.