

St James United Church

Message for December 24, 2023 Christmas Eve



“The Reason for the Season”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-4,6-7; Luke 2:1-20

I feel a heaviness in the air this Christmas, a shadowed sadness I've felt all season. I'm guessing some of you have felt it too. It grips you when you turn on the news, and not just global stories, but local ones. So much for peace and good will. And many of us have our personal worries. We feel like we're supposed to be joyful as we tell the Christmas story but is that its tone?

The tale begins with a census, creating upheaval as people have to register not where they live but where their ancestors were from. And so a poor couple are caught like everyone else by the diktat of a foreign power. It's one of the reasons we traditionally read from Isaiah 9, the dark in it capturing the dread that people felt in Isaiah's time as they were held by the authority of an earlier military power. The bulk of the Christmas narrative happens at night, the shepherds initially feel afraid. Given all of this, why do we have to feel joy as we recount Jesus' birth in a time fraught with real concern?

And yet, in the midst of the shadow there is warmth and promise, a sense of hope for the future, even if it not felt right away. Again Isaiah tells us that the people who experienced a time of such shadow, on them light shone. And not just in Isaiah's time, though that is part of the prophecy, but later, in the birth of a child who Mary is told is Son of the Most High, and who angels reveal is the Saviour, the Lord. These phrases were traditionally used of the emperor, the one who called for the census, but here this baby is the one who will bring peace, not just ending war but restoring us all to one another. And the light that he brought continues to shine in and through all who take seriously the call to follow the way of love, the path of peace.

This is why the core of this story is angels coming to shepherds as they keep watch in the hill country. Who are angels but divine messengers. And so what do we hear? God is speaking not in halls of power but among the lowly, telling them that they are worthy to hear the good news, and more than that, they are the good news, their lives a reflection of God's love. And

this for me is where the heaviness is tempered with hope, light shining in the night as a reminder that no amount of distress is ever without a glimmer of resolution. Jesus is laid in a manger, like parents putting their little one in a dresser drawer as a makeshift crib. He isn't rejected. Joseph's family is in the rooms above them, the inn that is full most likely the guestroom of the house, the "stable" part of it too. Jesus is born as love is shared.

This is the light of the story. It feels like the way we have told the story, Joseph and Mary alone, without family as Jesus is born, but miraculously looked after, keeps God at a distance, and Jesus at a distance too, suggesting that he is so very other than any of us. But instead Jesus is born in the thick of things, born in an ordinary, albeit stressed moment of a family's life. And this is what God does, draws near to us in the very real issues and worries of our lives. And the final gift in this is that in Jesus people experienced God, not just a part of God but the fullness of the Maker of all things, not present in power but vulnerable, needing to be cared for. That is how we can serve God, in very humble ways, and how God serves us, giving us the help we need based on the experience in Jesus of being weak, without power, needing protection. And so God comes to us with the love we need, a love that brings peace, in the care we show each other, most powerfully in simple ways, in a shoulder to cry on, in a word of acceptance, a compassionate ear.

Taking Jesus' vulnerability and so God's vulnerability to heart changes how we may see our purpose in the world, what is most important in our lives, God present in and through us as we simply love them. When we do this, we are a light in the dark of the night, the morning star announcing that the new day is about to dawn. So on this Christmas Eve, though it feels heavy, though there is sorrow, may we still celebrate. The light of the world is born. It is born in us, enabling us to be the light we need in our shadowed world.