

Sunday, December 24, 2017

Christmas Eve

Luke 2.1-20

St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Every year, on this holy night, we hear the words of Luke, recounting the iconic story of Christmas. A story that in memories of Christmases past and even now in our hearing, conjures warm and fuzzy images and feelings. Jesus, the Son of God, the savior of the world, the one foretold by the prophets of old as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. A birth in a manger, aglow with the love of his mother Mary, the love of his heavenly Father, under the watchful eye of his human father Joseph. A birth announced to a band of shepherds lovingly caring for their flocks. To whom the angels bid, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." A birth heralded by choirs of angels singing "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Shepherds who rush to the manger in Bethlehem to witness this glorious event. Who look on with adoring eyes at the miracle before them. Who excitedly tell of the angelic visitation. All these images, memorialized in the hymns and carols we sing in this most holy of seasons.

But truth be told, in many ways this story is far from warm and fuzzy. If we look at the details of the birth narrative with a critical eye, we see a story that is about the harsh realities of the world of 2,000 years ago. Luke's account of the birth narrative places these events during the reign of Emperor Augustus, when Quirinius was governor. This is a not-so-subtle reminder of the political climate of the day. The region of Palestine under the oppressive, iron-fisted rule of the Roman Empire. An empire that set up puppet kings and governors, such as Quirinius, to exercise their control over the locals.

One such act of control and oppression by the Roman authorities was a mandatory census of the locals – including a young peasant woman nine months pregnant forced to make the arduous journey of nearly 100 miles by foot and donkey to the ancestral home of her husband's family – with the ultimate purpose of exacting an oppressive tax on the people. Upon reaching Bethlehem, just in time for her to give birth, this young woman and her husband are unable to find a proper place to stay the night. A proper place for her to give birth to her child. With no room in the inn, they are forced to spend the cold night in a stable. A stable filled with dirty, smelly, animals. In a place barely fit for animals, let alone humans. Let alone a woman about to give birth. Let alone a woman about to give birth to the Son of God. And when this royal child is born, the only place to place him is in a manger – the feeding trough for animals. When this royal child is born, there are not even proper blankets to warm the baby. Merely strips of cloth, unsterilized, probably dirty, to bind up the child to keep him warm. No palace for this royal child.

The birth of a royal child was normally announced to the entire kingdom with great fanfare, with pomp and circumstance. But not for this royal child. The birth of the Messiah, the one long awaited by the people, whose birth had been foretold by prophets for centuries, was only announced to a band of lowly shepherds. Yet, somehow this was a fitting group to first receive the announcement of the Messiah's birth. King David had been a shepherd. And throughout the Old Testament, the rulers of Israel were referred to as shepherds, and God was deemed to be

the true shepherd. But despite the beautiful imagery of scripture, shepherds were generally held in low esteem. Living on the margins of society among stinky animals, they were socially despised and religiously unclean. Socially speaking, they were nobodies. Poor, illiterate, and uncouth.

Thus this child, God's only Son, enters the world, enters into the human condition, in the most humble of circumstances. Circumstances we would consider deplorable. Surrounded by the lowest of the low.

This is the uneasy political, economic, and social situation at the time of Jesus' birth. The condition into which he came to live among us. In some ways, circumstances that are not so different from the world we live in. For if we really look at this story, we see that things have not changed so much in 2,000 years. We still live in a world with political oppression. Where many live under corrupt and oppressive rule. Where the interests of the ruling elite are given preference over those of the masses. We still live in a world with significant economic disparity between rich and middle-class and poor. (At least, unlike Jesus' time, we now have a middle class.) Where the poorer among us cannot afford the necessities of life and are forced to make hard choices between one necessity and another – food or medication; medication or heat. Where we continue to be threatened with systems of taxation favoring the wealthy at the expense of the middle class and poor. Where those without a “room at the inn” – the homeless – cannot even find a manger to stay in, so are forced to live on the streets. Where refugees are forced to flee war-torn areas and oppressive regimes in search of a tolerable way of life and the hope of a better future. Where women are still treated as second-class citizens and as sexual objects. Where children are forced to work to help support their families instead of getting a proper education. Where people are still marginalized and oppressed because of who they are or who they love or what color their skin is or what god they worship. We in this country may have it better than many in the world where such disparity is overt and rampant. But we have our share, as well. Only it's more covert, more hidden from our middle class suburban eyes. Lest you have any doubts, watch the nightly news or read the morning newspaper. Or better yet, just walk around various parts of our own city.

Don't get me wrong. The world is not all doom and gloom. I believe there is far more positive in the world than negative. And despite the problems with our world, it is still a far better place to live than it was 2,000 years ago. But we cannot be Pollyanna about the overall circumstances of our world, of the human condition. We must consider both sides of the coin – the good and the bad – even at this time of year. Particularly at this time of year. Certainly there are some who wish we would keep our Christmas observances free of any references to politics or current events, even if obliquely. After all, many come on this most holy of nights not to be reminded of the world as it was, or as it is, but to be reminded of the message of hope that was birthed into the world along with Jesus. To be reminded of the words of the angels: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” But in the absence of bad news, good news is meaningless. In the absence of despair, hope is not possible. In the absence of distress, comfort is not required. In the absence of oppression, liberation is not necessary. In the absence of reality, salvation is but an illusion.

Trying to celebrate the birth of our Savior in a vacuum, without recognition of why we need a savior, undercuts the very meaning of the Incarnation. It diminishes the significance of what happened on that night in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. It denies the necessity for God becoming human and coming to live among us. If the world were perfect and completely good and just, we would not need a savior. If we lived in an idyllic Garden of Eden, all would be in conformance with God's will. We would be in right relationship with our God and with one another. We wouldn't need someone to come and show us a better way because we would already be living it. We wouldn't need someone to come and give us hope because we would already be fulfilled. We wouldn't need someone to come and forgive us because there would be nothing to forgive. We wouldn't need someone to come and give us eternal life because we would already have it. Alas, that is not the reality.

But as the angel said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid." Even in the midst of the realities – those of 2,000 years ago and those of today – there is indeed, as the angels announced, "good news of great joy for all the people." The good news is that the ways of this world are not permanent, unchangeable. That the ways of this world do not define us. They do not have the final word. There is a different way. There is a better way. A way that begins with the birth we witness this night.

While the opening verse of our Gospel invokes the names of worldly power and glory of its day, the birth narrative depicts a dramatically different image of those who are poor and humble as the ones exemplifying true power and glory. The "good news of great joy for all people" proclaimed by the heavenly host is that God has not forgotten his people. That God has not overlooked the suffering of his people – no matter how large or how small – but has chosen to enter into it fully. That God has chosen to become as we are – human. That God has chosen to come among us not as a mighty king, but as a baby. One who will grow as we grow. One who will live as we live. One who will experience what we experience. One who will suffer as we suffer. One who will weep as we weep. One who will feel joy as we feel joy. And yes, One who will die as we die. But the one difference between this child and the rest of us is that he will be resurrected to new life. And the good news is that we too will share in that new life. That is the entire reason for his coming. That is the entire reason for this night. To give us hope in the midst of life's struggles. To give us the promise of a new way of life. To demonstrate God's enduring love.

The shepherds, the riffraff of society, were the first to hear the Good News. They were the first witnesses to the Savior's birth. They were the first to kneel in praise. They were the first to join their voices with the heavenly chorus and to go out and tell what they have witnessed. With the events of this night, these are no longer the marginalized of society but God's exalted messengers. We are called to stand with them. We are called to testify to the miracle of the birth we witness this night. We are called to hear the Good News. To proclaim "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" To share that message of hope for all humanity. To embrace the promise of a new reality. To proclaim God's love for all humanity in the birth of Jesus the Christ, his Son and our Savior. As the angel promised, this is indeed "good news of great joy for all the people."

Merry Christmas!