

Friday, December 24, 2021

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9.2-7; Luke 2.1-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/468425154707732>

“Being Vulnerable”

“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” (Is 9.2). These words which begin our first reading for today were originally part of an oracle to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah who were vulnerable to threats by the Assyrian Empire, which had already taken control of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC. Actions which took a dramatic toll on the social, economic, and political fabric of the day. And while referencing conditions and providing an oracle in response to conditions 2,700 years ago, these words seem remarkably applicable today.

Looking back over the last two years, over the time since we were last able to gather for an in-person celebration of Christmas in 2019, the image of us being a people who walk in darkness seems particularly applicable. Just a few months after our last in-person Christmas services, we entered this pandemic. A time of darkness unlike anything our planet had seen in a hundred years. Darkness in all its forms: physical, emotional, spiritual. Darkness as we faced the specter of the unknown. Darkness as many—at times, most—businesses and institutions, churches included, were shuttered. Darkness as, in many places, our health care system teetered on the brink of collapse. Darkness as we sheltered in place, fearful of getting sick. Darkness as our economy seemed to be grinding to a halt. Darkness as we were forced to shelter in place, without human contact save those in our own household. Darkness as we were forced to stay away from our places of worship and access to the sacraments. Darkness as we watched the number of deaths increase at an unprecedented pace. Darkness as we lost friends and loved ones to COVID-19.

And while things seemed to get better about the middle of last year and inch back toward normalcy—at least that was the hope—by Christmas 2020, we were back in lockdown. Re-entering a time of emotional and spiritual darkness even as we approached the darkest days of the calendar year. Thankfully, soon after Christmas 2020, the light of hope began to shine, with the advent of vaccines. Allowing for the slow, cautious return to something more akin to what we knew before. So yes, we are a people who have walked in darkness for the last two years. And we have and are seeing a great light as our lives and our society return to some semblance of normalcy. Even as we continue with the rollercoaster of on again, off again mask mandates. As we continue with threats of new variants and associated surges. As we deal with the ongoing economic fallout.

The one thing that we have learned over the last two years is just how vulnerable we are. How vulnerable we are as human beings—particularly those who are older or have underlying health conditions. Vulnerabilities that have caused us to look at our activities and how we interact in new ways. How vulnerable we are a society, as a nation, as a world. Vulnerabilities that have

resulted in economic disruptions, social upheavals, and political divisions of an unprecedented scale. At least in modern history.

And sadly, we have seen how vulnerable we are in our own congregation. When literally hours before this service, we found out a choir member may have been exposed to COVID-19 and so, out of a need to be cautious and to protect ourselves, we had to assume our entire choir might be compromised. Changing everything at the last minute. Such is the vulnerable world we live in. Such is our individual vulnerability.

In response to threatening conditions 2,700 years ago, the prophet Isaiah provided a message of hope. The coming of a king, whom he describes in familiar words: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Is 9.6). While likely referring to the coming reign of King Hezekiah who would defend the Southern Kingdom of Judah from the threat of the Assyrians, we recognize these words in a different context. They are a description of another king that would likewise address vulnerabilities facing humanity. Although in a radically different way.

Our Gospel reading, not unlike the reading from Isaiah, points to another time in the history of Israel in which there was great vulnerability. "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered" (Lk 2.1). Israel, like most of the known world at the time, was under the control of the Roman Empire. And the Emperor had just commanded a census. Not to provide for a better allocation of resources or to determine representation in the government. No, he wanted an accurate accounting of how many people there were so he could maximize his tax base. Not only to know how many people there were, but also, where to find them to collect tax revenue. This was a time of great exploitation and oppression. It was during this turbulent time when God's people seemed particularly vulnerable. It was into this moment in history that God chose to send his Son into the world. Again, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us." But unlike the coronation song contained in Isaiah's prophecy, this son that is given to us, this king that is born in our midst, is not born into a luxurious royal palace.

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger." Even under the best of circumstances, birth in ancient times was a dangerous venture. One filled with great vulnerability, for both mother and child. They did not have access to sterile birthing rooms. They did not have access to trained medical professionals. Children were born at home. If lucky, there might be a midwife or other women, family, or friends, who assisted in the delivery. That was the best-case scenario. But Jesus' birth, as we heard, did not occur under best-case conditions. In fact, you couldn't have much worse conditions. Giving birth in a stable, surrounded by dirty, smelly animals. Probably no one to help with the delivery, except for Joseph. And rather than nice clean blankets to wrap the newborn child in, they had to make do with bands of cloth. Probably scrounged up from who knows where. So, while being born is a delicate, vulnerable experience, this birth was particularly so. Jesus was born in a most vulnerable way, under the most vulnerable of conditions. That is the image of this day. That is what we celebrate this day. At its essence, today is about recognizing that profound vulnerability surrounding Jesus' birth.

That may sound odd. Celebrating vulnerability. But it is cause for celebration when you consider that Jesus was the Son of God. That Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. God with us in the flesh. Complete with all the vulnerabilities that we humans experience. The vulnerable way we are born. The vulnerabilities we face throughout our lives. The cause for celebration is the fact that our God chose to make himself vulnerable. This is absolutely mind-blowing. Think about that for a moment. God chose to become vulnerable, just as we are. To experience life as we do. To be in solidarity with us.

Of the meaning of the Incarnation, of what Christmas is truly about, 20th century Jesuit priest and theologian Karl Rahner wrote:

If in faith we say, "It is Christmas" . . . then we mean that an event came bursting into the world and into our life, an event that has changed all that we call the world and our life . . . Through this fact, that God has become human, time and human life are changed. Not to the extent that God has ceased to be Godself, the eternal Word of God, with all splendor and unimaginable bliss. But God has really become human . . . Now God's self [as Jesus] is on our very earth, where he is no better off than we and where he receives no special privileges, but our every fate: hunger, weariness, enmity, mortal terror and a wretched death . . . God has come. God is there in the world. And therefore everything is different from what we imagine it to be . . . When we say, "It is Christmas," we mean that God has spoken into the world his last, his deepest, his most beautiful word in the incarnate Word . . . And this word means: I love you."¹

We are painfully aware of the vulnerability of human life. Our history bears that out. The last two years have certainly borne that out. Even the events of this day have borne that out. The message of Christmas is that we do not bear our vulnerabilities alone. Our God bears them with us. Our God experiences them with us. Not as a distant God looking in, but as the One who willingly chose to come among us, to be born as one of us, to live as one of us. The One who, in so doing, willingly chose to become vulnerable, out of love for us.

"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." It is the light of God's love. God's love in the form of a vulnerable child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. May the light of God's love born this night remain with you, particularly during your own times of vulnerability.

Merry Christmas!

¹ Richard Rohr, "A Sign of God's Love," Center for Action and Contemplation, December 23, 2021. <https://cac.org/a-sign-of-gods-love-2021-12-23/>