

12.24.2023 Christmas Eve

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

“Good tidings of great joy to all”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Blessed Christmas greetings to you all! On the first Christmas, the angel said to the shepherds, “*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which shall be to all people.*” Christmas is about good news of great joy for all people. Christmas isn’t just for Christians; it is the announcement of God’s Messiah for all people – for this entire world God so loves.

It has been said many times, but Christmas is that one moment each year, when people remember, joy, hope, and peace on earth. It is my sincere prayer that you will know joy, hope, and peace on earth throughout the coming year.

The words of the angel, “*Fear not,*” are especially meaningful this year. The world has only recently cleared a global pandemic only to be in crisis again, teetering on the brink of a global descent into war. We live in a world increasingly fractured by nationalism, religious strife, and poverty. Some might say, “Pastor, don’t politicize Christmas” – to which my response is, “Jesus was born in the midst of poverty and against the backdrop of the world’s political struggles.” Luke’s gospel takes pains to let us know the names of historical figures, locating Jesus’ birth within human history.

The Messiah was born homeless in stable in Bethlehem, in a land occupied by a foreign Roman army. Jesus is the child-king whose birth threatened the political power of Herod, King of Judea. The Son of God was born in a manger – a feeding trough – because Joseph and Mary could find no lodging in a city crowded with people obeying Caesar Augustus. Crowds of people were returning home to pay an imperial tax to an occupying Roman government. The Nativity of Our Lord takes place against Roman rule and the politics of Judea.

However, his story is not simply past history; it is the beginning of God’s ongoing history continuing through each of us. On this Holy Night we remember the angel’s announcement of good news to all people, and the promise of peace on earth and good will for all humanity.

Yet this year, there are wars around the world, and war in the Middle East. This year, there are no tourists in Bethlehem, and some Bethlehem churches have decorated their nativity scenes with rocks and concrete rubble, placing the baby Jesus in a manger amid scenes of war – a reminder that

the Christmas announcement of good news of great joy and peace continues to come to a broken and divided world.

Yet again on Christmas Eve, the light of Christ offers hope in the darkness of this world. The prophet Isaiah's words remain profoundly relevant today, "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them has light shined.*" Isaiah's words are political and prophetic: the yoke of burden, the rod of the oppressor, and garments of war rolled in blood will be burned, ending human warfare. Yet when will we finally heed the prophet's words and stop the madness of war? When will we end the oppression of the poor, and the discrimination of people for their ethnicity, gender, and religion? Like the Psalmist, when will we "*Sing to the Lord a new song?*" Unless we change our old song of sinfulness and strife, we will never be able to sing to the Lord a new song.

Isaiah calls this child, "*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*" Isaiah's words foreshadow a kingdom not of war or oppression, but of justice and righteousness for all humanity. Humanity longs to sing a new song of good news and peace for all.

This year as the world cries out in lament with tears and mourning among the nations. At Christmas, we remember that in Jesus, God lifts humanity upward toward peace and outward in love toward our neighbor.

One holy night five hundred years ago, Martin Luther preached about Jesus' birth, saying,

There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: 'If only I had been there! How quickly I would have been to help the Baby! How happy I would have been to wash his linens...and to go with the shepherds to the manger!...Sure, you would! You say that now because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time, you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why do you not do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need, you do to the Lord Christ Himself.

Christmas is about seeing Jesus sharing in our humanity. Christmas is about knowing Jesus born in human likeness, and knowing that my neighbor also bears the likeness of Christ. Christmas is about seeing the Prince of Peace present in the cold of a manger with a frightened young mother and father. Christmas is about good news to all who are in need on this cold night in every place in this world. Those who because of war have no homes, no food, no water; those who because of poverty sleep homeless without warmth or welcome in our community; those who because of discrimination are not seen as fully sharing in the likeness of Christ – Jesus Christ was born to live

in each of these.

For Christmas to have meaning, we are to serve Him in our neighbor in need. What you do to your neighbor in need, you do to the Lord Christ Himself. As you celebrate Christmas remember: He was born to share our humanity so that we might share in His humanity in our neighbor.

Like the song in tonight's preludes, "*Some Children See Him*," we hear words encouraging us with this vision of hope and peace: "The children in each different place will see the Baby Jesus' face like theirs."

Jesus Christ was born to share our humanity. When we see Christ in our neighbor, we are singing "*a new song*." When we see our neighbor suffering, homeless, a refugee, discriminated for their humanity – we see Christ born to share in the likeness of our neighbor.

Sing the new song of Jesus Christ, not only at Christmas, but each day. Through you, God will bring good news and peace on earth for all people.

God is writing history through you.

Jesus Christ is the new song – He is good news of great joy for all the world.

A Blessed Christmas to you all! Amen.