

We sing His glory, tell His worth. But in a stable dark and dim: The Word made flesh, a light for all. For all He loved, His life He gave. (a line from the hymn, We have a gospel to proclaim)

Christmas Night 2023

Isaiah 9.2-7, Titus 2.11-14, Luke 2.1-14, [15-20]

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, Mary's firstborn begins matter-of-factly by embedding it in the lived political realities of Palestine at the time and in the life of a Hebrew couple Joseph and Mary. "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all should be registered." Heeding the Emperor's decree Joseph and Mary make their way from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judaea to the city of David. There Mary gives birth. "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

We are gathered to celebrate this birth acknowledging what Paul writes in his letter to his companion Titus "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all..." And with Isaiah we see a great light. Tonight we give thanks that the light of which the prophet speaks now shines on us in our day. It is this light, Jesus that lightens every human being as John the Evangelist writes.

Tonight's reading from Book of the Prophet Isaiah invites us to remember that we too know what darkness is. We live in dark times. We need only think of the killing of 15 persons in Prague on Thursday and the spilling of blood in the Middle East that affects us all deeply and all the other ongoing conflicts too numerous to mention here. The ones that don't catch the headlines. There are

various kinds of darkness. They can be political or even religious – many people the world over know no or little freedom. But for us it may be primarily a spiritual reality this darkness, and dare I say it a Weltanschauung (ideology) that has enfolded us. How true is that for you and me I wonder? To what extent do we simply go with the flow? Hand on heart, to what extent has this wondrous birth we celebrate, Christ's birth and all that follows from it, his teaching, his instructions, his living amongst us as one of us, his passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and glorification changed us? Cut deep. Shaped us. To what extent are we still in the process of transformation and do we have the will and the courage to grow further? I don't exempt myself. To what extent have you or I exchanged "the glory of the immortal God" (Romans 1:23) for a narrative from which the sense of wonder and glory is glaringly absent? A mindset that we often unconsciously and uncritically inhabit?

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is unremarkable. We are even told what any mother, parent or midwife would have done. Mary wraps her firstborn in bands of cloth to keep him warm and enfolded, and lays him down to sleep that she too might get a little rest. It is all unremarkable. It is all ordinary and here is where we uncover both the beauty and the mystery of this night, if we but look and linger. God becoming small, giving himself to inhabit a particular time, in a particular place, in a particular body (flesh and blood like ours) and amongst a particular people. The Lord of time subjects himself to the constraints of time. The Lord of space, of all that is created, seen and unseen, is subject to the constraint of place.

The shift in Luke's account comes suddenly. The transition is abrupt. It is dramatic even. We are transported from the stable in Bethlehem to shepherds

in grazing fields outside the city. We see the shepherds with their herds in our mind's eyes "keeping watch over their flock by night..." It is quiet. Possibly it is a starlit night or is it pitch black? For dramatic affect it is definitively pitch black. And then! Suddenly! Out of nowhere! "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them. And the glory of the Lord shone around, and they were terrified." WE need to take that in. THEN THE ANGEL OF THE LORD STOOD BEFORE THEM! AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHONE AROUND THEM! AND THEY WERE SORE AFRAID!

The two scenes could not be more different. There is the birth of the child. The safe delivery. A mother caring for her child. The child being laid down. Humility. And then there is the majestic angel radiating light, glory, terrifying to behold accompanied by words that will permeate the gospel. Those "Do not be afraid(s)"! Which we so eagerly want to hear and believe today. Here and now. Can we make them our own? Can they take up a home in us? They are words we long to hear. Do not be afraid! Why? This messenger brings good news. Let us hear again the message the angel brings, "Do not be afraid; for see—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 Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord." The message is one of joy. No, it is more. It brings joy. And it is joy that we desire. Joy is a great good. It brings a lightness to our being, when we can easily make heavy weather of the things that we are facing. There is that bright hymn that we sing on Christmas Day. "Joy to the world the Lord is come." "Joy to the world the Saviour reigns." And "repeat the sounding joy!"

Tonight we are invited to discover this joy for ourselves or reclaim it should we have lost it along the way of this our earthly pilgrimage. We shall not pass this

way again. This joy is specific. It is anchored. It is the joy that comes in knowing that this baby born in a stable is “the Saviour, who is Messiah, the Lord”. God is turned to the world. God is not indifferent. God cares. This message comes with the assurance that it is for all. And as the message is for all, as the angel exclaims, we are invited into the joy of the Lord (see Matthew 25:23). This message of abounding joy is doubled down on by the appearance of the heavenly host. This is the highpoint of the second scene of tonight’s gospel. And what a magnificent scene it is. Can you picture it? “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all in whom he delights!”

We Christians are always to be looking to God and to the world. It is vitally important to get the order straight. We look to God so that coming to know God we might better serve God in the world in accordance with the divine will that all might come to know the Good News that the Saviour has come for all, for you and for me that our joy may be complete. In John’s gospel we hear Jesus say, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15.11) We are not to be afraid of life, although there is much, very much to navigate often on a daily basis. We do so knowing that God turned towards us.

I will draw to a close by telling you about Sandra Peniston-Bird, a former member of this congregation, who lived and worked in Vienna for many years finally returning to the United Kingdom. She is now deceased. At her funeral her daughter told the story of how Sandra struggled to understand how she could love God more than her own children till she discovered not through theory, but in the living out of her faith – not without its challenges and disappointments -

that in loving God she came to love her children more. Beautiful! This is an example of joy uncovered. There is a great truth here. This love of God, God first, is available to all. You are already loved. In a Johannine epistle we read, “We love because he [God] first loved us.” (1 John 4.19) Remember what Paul wrote to Titus all those years ago? “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ... “ “... so let us put on the armour of light now in the time of this transitory life in which Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility” and in doing so become zealous for good deeds living lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly. **Amen.**

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