

## **“Christmas Faith in a Dark World”**

A sermon prepared by the Rev. Hank Lay  
for presentation at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
in Manasquan, NJ, on Dec 26/27, 2020

The Sunday after Christmas (Christmas 1B)

Isaiah 61:10-11, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:22-40

## **“Christmas Faith in a Dark World”**

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to God who came among us in the Christ Child.

“While shepherds watched their flocks by night all seated on the ground the angel of the Lord appeared and glory shown around.”

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king” is sung by an angel choir on a dark night.

The image of joy breaking into darkness permeates our Christmas carols.

And darkness hung heavy upon Luke’s world. Caesar Augustus moved everyone around to enroll for a new set of taxes. King Herod was known for his cruelty, including the slaughter of innocent children. In our story today Joseph and Mary bring an offering appropriate for their status in their

world among the poor. Whether in a stable, a cave, or among family the Christ Child came into a world of great need.

Darkness persists in our world. O Little Town of Bethlehem is controlled by an oppressive military government. Structures of power in many lands regularly ignore or oppress the poor. Relentless storms have destroyed property and killed animals and humans across the world. A pandemic has sapped the life out of many around the world. The darkness of despair covers much of the earth.

Yet, as Scripture and hymns declare, our world then and now is where we encounter God breaking in as light. God's presence transforms everything, with the result that there is joyous singing everywhere.

**Isaiah** declares God is at work. Like the joy of wedding preparations, like the early sprouts of a well-cared for garden, God transforms our lived reality. All the world is invited to see and rejoice. "Joy to the WORLD."

God is not finished with God's work, but just as a wedding is filled with the hope of a happy marriage and the blessing of children, and the spouts in a garden anticipate a harvest of flowers or food, so the very presence of God anticipates full salvation and righteousness, the establishment of a rightly ordered community of life and freedom from all that oppresses folk. All that is wrong, internally and externally, is being made right. Isaiah was able to see through all the chaos of his time to discern God at work, rebuilding a community both physically and spiritually. And so he rejoiced greatly.

**Paul**, writing to a minority community in the Roman Empire, declares their status as children of God. No longer trapped by any form of human legalism that makes people slaves, they and we are free to address the Creator of heaven and earth as our beloved Father, a truth taught by Jesus. The status of all human beings from the beginning of time has been renewed and proclaimed by the Christ event. Because our status is one of adoption, Christ's family is not limited to Anglicans or Lutherans, to Catholics or Orthodox, or even to Christians. We cry out "Abba, Father" in love and amazement at what God is doing among us. "O come, Desire of Nations, bind all people in one heart and mind." "Rejoice! And again I say, Rejoice!"

Mary and Joseph, the poor couple in **Luke's Gospel**, as they fulfill their obligations as good Jews in the Temple in Jerusalem, meet two strangers who reaffirm the meaning of their recent experiences with the angels. As declared by Isaiah, so also Simeon and Anna declare God's salvation and redemption breaking forth. Not just for Jews but for all the world the light of God has broken forth. God is reaffirming God's promises to overcome oppression and transform all of creation.

Simeon and Anna were steeped in the covenant promises of God going back to Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jeremiah. God desired a community of justice without violence, where the poor would be lifted up and the powerful, commonly turned into oppressors by their riches, would either rule with justice or be overthrown. Rooted in Hannah and many prophets, Mary herself dared to claim that vision. Now in Jesus, echoing his life and teachings, people with eyes to see praised God for what God was

about to do. This would not be just for Jews, who would be divided by Jesus. No, all the world would see more clearly the light of God's intentions.

We have sung these truths this holy season -

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set all people free. From our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in Thee.

O little town of Bethlehem! ... in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Our world in all its dimensions has been teetering. Environmental changes are threatening humans and animals. Population growth and the gap between the rich and the poor stretches earth's sustaining ability. A pandemic has killed well over a million people world-wide. Social and political conflict is tearing some countries apart.

Still the light of Christ is shining. Earth is healing, seen in cleaner air in some major cities. Animals are reappearing in places where we thought they had been driven to extinction. Evangelical Christian leaders have reached out to leaders of other faith groups to work together toward the vision of God's future based on acceptance and cooperation. Here in Monmouth County food pantries are being well-stocked by people who care deeply for their neighbors.

Can we see it?? Isaiah saw it in his time when Jerusalem was still being

rebuilt and a foreign empire controlled its life. Paul under Roman domination saw transformation in individuals and communities. A new world was breaking in. Luke saw the poor being lifted up, both Jews and Gentiles. All will be well, they proclaim. God is at work. Do we join God? When we work with God we discover that the improbable becomes reality.

Pastor Carolyn Gillette, a hymn writer in the American Presbyterian tradition, composed these words based on today's Lucan passage -

“Lord, let your servant go in peace;  
Your Word has been fulfilled.”  
Because we've seen your saving grace  
We know that all is well.

Through all the sorrow, pain and death,  
We dare, O God, to sing.  
For you once sent your Son to earth —  
And that changed everything.

There's much we cannot understand,  
Nor order, nor control;  
We place our lives into your hands  
And trust you'll make us whole.

Lord, let your servants daily know  
That we are not alone;  
And may we find, where'er we go,

You'll lead us safely home. (1)

We have seen the Christ Child. He is God's witness and instrument to a brighter future. We can claim that vision now. We can join hands with people around us and around the world to move into a future defined by God, one that brings blessing to all but especially to the poor and oppressed. "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!" Amen.

(1) Lord, Let Your Servant Go in Peace. Tune: CHRISTMAS C.M. ("While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night") Text: Copyright © 2010 by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. All rights reserved. Used with permission.