



CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

Christmas Eve Sermon, 2016
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Dean of the Cathedral

Child for us sinners, poor and in the manger, we would embrace thee with awe and love; who would not love thee, loving us so dearly? O come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “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.”

The Great Hope of light breaking forth in darkness has been proclaimed by people of faith in every generation since Isaiah, especially on this night.

Christmas Eve is a big-hearted moment in our common life, when we are invited to lay aside our fears and adore a vulnerable baby - who is the light of the world, Emmanuel, God-with-us, who loves us from before time and forever.

We gather tonight, a few short days after the longest night of the year, to give thanks for light itself, and especially for The light which grows brighter and brighter in our hearts until it transforms us and the world around us by God’s grace. The light of Christ - which is joy and hope and love to those of us living in any kind of darkness.

The warmth of this night invites us to be witnesses to Christ’s light at work in the world and in our lives, and to make that light manifest in word and deed.

Luke's Gospel vividly describes how the Light comes into the world and into our hearts. It comes in ordinary ways, to ordinary people who open themselves to others. The Light comes as inspiration in a dream, a song, a prayer, an action, a birth. The first coming of Jesus the Light took place - not in a perfected world at peace - but in the same complex and challenging world we know, to people like us.

In those days, fear and apocalyptic thinking were widespread. Many communities and peoples were marginalized. Leaders could not be trusted to uphold the dignity of their people or to ensure justice in their realms. Scandals abounded. Violence was rampant. Societies teetered on the brink of collapse.

Quirinius, the Governor of Syria, who may not be familiar to us now, but who gets a mention from Luke - was taking over leadership in Syria from a previous Governor, Archelaus, a son of Herod, who had been recently deposed and dramatically banished from the empire.

Luke mentions Quirinius in the Gospel not only to set the timeline for Jesus' birth, but to make clear that Christ comes into a world that is far from settled. Jesus, the everlasting light, comes among us in great humility during troubled times, inviting us to follow him into a brighter future. God responds to the instability of the world with a star in the sky and a baby born and laid in a manger. God makes plain that ultimate stability, for us, is found in a stable at Bethlehem. If we go looking for it elsewhere, we will be disappointed and confounded. Let those with ears listen.

We find and enjoy the stability of God by opening our hearts to the one in the stable and to those around us. We co-create God's 'stable' kingdom on earth - in the midst of profound instability- by prayer and faithfulness to our baptismal mission: To seek and serve Christ in all persons and to love our neighbors as ourselves. By incarnating The Golden Rule at the core of all the world's major religious traditions. The love of God in Christ compels us to protect the least and the lost, the outcast and the vulnerable. To serve the poor and the forgotten. To accept new people into our lives and our community and our nation. When we do this, we find that our world is made brighter in both clear and ineffable ways by God's grace.

The baby we adore and celebrate tonight, in this crèche, grows up fully to be our Savior and Lord, the most disruptive and influential religious person in the history of the world. He invites us to cast all our cares and worries upon his shoulders - to let them go as we care for others in His name. He calls us to follow in his humble way of compassion, justice and love - and thereby find ourselves reconciled to God and each other.

How extraordinarily hopeful are these words from Isaiah: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; the government shall rest upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to his government, and there shall be endless peace [in]...his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.”

Perhaps someday, our chapter of the Greatest Story Ever Told will be written in a holy book. Maybe it will begin, “In those days when Obama was still President and Trump was President-Elect, an angel of the Lord appeared to them in Garden City - and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

“But the angel said to them, ‘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, a Savior, who is the Lord’...and suddenly there was heard over the Cathedral tower a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.’”

If that’s how our chapter of God’s story begins tonight, I wonder what we do next?...