



“Christmas Message 2016”
Scripture – Luke 2:1-20
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Saturday, December 24, 2016

I can be a sucker for sentimental stories and that is typically the way the birth of Jesus is portrayed. However, I cannot figure out why we ever began to imagine the birth of Jesus as a warm glow, Norman Rockwell scene when all the facts scream out the opposite.

Mary, a teenage girl great with child was not able to lie down in her own home and deliver her child surrounded by friends and family. With her baby due any minute, she had to make a trip that took four or five days. She likely alternated between walking and riding on the back of a donkey that jostled her back and forth like a small boat on a turbulent sea. And, as her contractions intensified, she must have been frantic to find some place to lay her head before it was time to deliver her baby. Then, when she and Joseph finally reached their destination there was not a single room to be found. They had no choice but to bed down with livestock.

Lest anyone forget, they had not made this trip of their own volition. The occupying army had foisted this hardship on them.

Can't you picture Joseph cursing each step as they plod the Judean roads hoping to reach Bethlehem before the baby arrives?

Rather than turning the birth of Jesus into a tender Hallmark moment, it's best we not forget the harsh realities surrounding the actual event. Mary and Joseph were a poor Jewish couple who lived among a people who were oppressed by a foreign power. They were governed by ruthless kings and corrupt government officials. Poverty and poor health were widespread. It is important to remember that it was in such a dark and desperate time that Jesus was born.

Why is that necessary? Because today, many think their Christmas is spoiled if everything is not picture perfect. News flash: The birth of Jesus was not the apex of an already glorious moment. It was not the icing atop a splendid cake. Jesus did not enter the world to encourage successful people to celebrate their good fortune. He came when times were bleak to declare that God does not simply show up when we are riding the crest of the wave. God is present in both the highlights and the heartaches of life.

That is why our families do not have to be void of conflict, why our health can be in the pits, why our cities do not have to be completely safe, and why our world does not have to be at peace before we can sing “Joy to the World!”

The Gospel of Luke speaks of angels appearing to shepherds and trumpeting of peace on earth. Matthew tells us that magi followed a star to come and worship the new born king. Do you remember what the Gospel of John says? “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

We celebrate the birth of Jesus because Christ is the foundation of our hope. A quick assessment of ourselves and the human race will reveal more despair than anticipation of a better future. Our hope is in God, because God can guide us toward a world whose principle characteristics are compassion, beauty, justice and peace.

God seeks to fill us with hope, but I fear that all too often we resist. We want to dredge up our evidence that there is insufficient reason to hope. There are too many boulders in the path and the road is too long and we have limited resources. Hopelessness shines the spotlight on all the reasons life will not get better. Hopelessness rationalizes why we should accept things as they are and not strain ourselves to break new ground.

How quickly we forget that God is full of surprises! No matter how dark the sky and no matter how unrelenting the storm, the sun will shine again. God is in the business of piercing darkness with unexpected light. Hope is putting faith in God’s vision of a better tomorrow, and then trusting God’s Spirit to fill us with the confidence and the courage to bring it to pass.

German theologian Emil Brunner said, “What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life...the fate of humanity is dependent on its supply of hope.”

One of the reasons Christmas is so popular with both people of faith and secularists is because it is a season of hope. Children learn this an early age. We teach them to hope for a special present. We encourage them to ask Santa for what they want and we help Santa out by doing the best we can to see that our child or grandchild receives their wish.

As we know, this hoping for a special present does not always end with childhood. These days we see commercials encouraging us to hope for a shiny new *Lexus* for Christmas. Or, you may be like the middle-aged person who actually wrote a letter to Santa. “Dear Santa, this year all I ask for is a big fat bank account and a slim body. Please don’t get these two mixed up like you did last year!”

Of course, hoping for a wad of wealth or a svelte physique is more like wishful thinking. It is “hope light.” It is not the sort of hope that packs our lives with meaning. It is not the sort of hope that fills us with courage when faced with dark times. It is not the sort of hope that makes us passionate about striving for justice or working for peace. It is not the sort of hope that comes from knowing that when we are in harmony with God, we will not surrender when we are threatened or capitulate to despair.

African American pastor, Otis Moss, tells how his six year-old daughter taught him a lesson about hope when the church where he was pastor was experiencing dark times. He was receiving death threats. He would get messages that would say, “We are going to kill you. We are going to bomb your church.”

The tension and fear constantly robbed him from a decent night of sleep. “One night, when he was half asleep, he heard a noise in the house. His wife punched him and said, ‘You go check that out.’ Very quietly he crawled out of bed and like a good preacher he grabbed his rod and his staff to comfort him. His rod and staff was made in Louisville and had the name ‘Slugger’ on it.”

“He crept downstairs, and then he heard the noise again and realized it was coming from upstairs. He peaked in his daughter’s room and there was his daughter Makayla dancing in the darkness; spinning around saying, ‘Look at me Daddy.’ Moss said, ‘Makayla, you need to go to bed. It is three o’clock in the morning.’” But she said, ‘No, look at me Daddy. Look at me.’ And she was spinning, barrettes and pigtails twirling.

He started to become huffy about her going back to bed, but then he heard God's whisper: 'Look at your daughter! She's dancing in the dark. The darkness is all around her but it is not in her!'"

Moss says that his daughter "reminded him that weeping may endure for a night, but if you dance long enough joy will come in the morning. Do not let the darkness find its way into you. Dance in the dark."¹

A wise spiritual leader said, "No matter what sort of difficulties or how painful life is, if we lose our hope, that's our real disaster."²

The birth of Christ speaks a word to us in good times and bad: Dance in the dark. Dance with every fiber of your body because our Lord has come!

NOTES

1. John Morgan, "Christmas Message 2015," December 24, 2015.
2. Dalai Lama XIV.