



"Christmas Message 2020"
Scripture – Luke 2:1-20
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Thursday, December 24, 2020

Janet, a pastor in the Midwest, received a text from a member of her congregation recently. It included a photograph of the woman's exhausted face. She was asking for prayers, so Janet called her.

When the woman answered, her voice was flat. She is working as a traveling nurse in Southern California. She told her pastor that the work is like "walking into fire every single day" because she is constantly caring for someone who is critically ill with COVID-19.

The night before, she had a 33-year-old in her care. Suddenly he spiked a fever of 104. Alone in the room with him, she immediately began to pack him in ice to bring his fever down. But there wasn't much ice in the room so she called out for more and while she waited she started soaking paper towels in water and using those instead.

She shouted to him as she worked, "All you have to do is keep breathing! I'll do the rest!"

And he did. And she did. And his fever came down. And when she ended her shift he was better.

But she is so exhausted. Not only from this one, because nurses do this all the time. Rather, it is the constancy and the high intensity of it repeated shift after shift, day after day, night after night. It is also this: with COVID patients, family cannot be at their loved ones' sides, so those providing the care are carrying not only the physical demands of the work, but the emotional strain of being the 'only one' physically present to encourage, to hold, and to pray.¹ On top of all of that is the fear and anxiety of catching the virus themselves.

~ Let us pause for a moment and say a silent prayer for the health care workers and our family and friends who are suffering from COVID ~

While the pandemic has extracted an especially heavy toll from health care workers, it has impacted all of our lives. It has been much crueler to some than others, but no one has escaped its shadow. If you throw in the divisive election, the unrest over racism, the blow to the economy and millions out of work, it adds up to 2020 being a very dark year.

Some say it feels a bit callous to celebrate Christmas in a year that has been so mean to so many. But lest we think that celebrating Christmas is only for happy days, it helps to remember the historical situation when Jesus was born.

We have softened the story so that it is child-friendly and our little ones can traipse around in bathrobes and halos, but they would be frightened to know the original context. Augustus was the Roman Emperor and he could be ruthless. Mary and Joseph not only lived under occupation by a foreign power, but they were forced to travel for seven to 10 days with Mary due to deliver any minute. Once they reach their destination, they are turned away from the warmth of an inside room. Giving birth in the first century was a dangerous affair for both mother and child. There was no guarantee that both would survive. King Herod resided only a few miles away and he was a brute who bullied people into submission.

Yet, while fear hung over the heads of Mary and Joseph there was something else; something more powerful than fear. Hope. They trusted God to nudge the world to a new place, a better place – where “the wolf shall live with the lamb” (Isaiah 11:6) and where nations “shall beat swords into plowshares.” (Isaiah 2:4)

What gave the shepherds ears to hear angels singing? What motivated them to drop what they were doing and run to the stable in Bethlehem, if not trust in God and hope?

Reason and science can help us cure some of the ills of our ailing planet. But we need more than that. We need hope in something greater than ourselves.

That is why we are here tonight, why we have come out despite the rain, and why we gather to hear the story we already know. We long to hear angels’ voices, to see a guiding star and to peer into the manger. We want to be reminded of our deepest and truest hope – that God is with us.

That is what Christmas is all about. We struggle for words to explain this mystery of Jesus being filled with God as no other, but we come up short. The fancy theological term is incarnation and what it boils down to is that the Creator of the universe is not detached from the activity of the world. God is present on earth and God was present in a special way in this child whose birth we celebrate tonight.

Of course there would be no celebration if this child had not grown up to become a window into the heart of God. Jesus revealed that God is not a short-tempered judge who thrives on punishment, but a God of second chances; a God who is eager to transform us into our better selves – people of goodwill, people of hope.

The birth of Jesus declares God’s never ending love for us. The Jewish prophets helped us understand that the Creator of heaven and earth is just and merciful and abounding in steadfast love. Jesus added to the prophets by opening our eyes to the **depth** of God’s love. It is a love that will not remain untouched by suffering. It is a love that possesses a special affinity for those who dwell in darkness and desperately need the light of hope.

Theologian Howard Thurman asks what Christmas is about and then provides the answer: “It is the rainbow arched over the roof of the sky when the clouds are heavy with foreboding. It is the cry of life in the newborn babe when, forced from its mother’s nest, it claims its right to live. It is the brooding Presence of the Eternal Spirit making crooked paths straight, rough places smooth, tired hearts refreshed, dead hopes stir with newness of life. It is the promise of tomorrow at the close of every day, the movement of life in defiance of death, and the assurance that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil.”²

Tom Long “told a story about a man he saw carrying his wife across the threshold. Tom was driving by when he glimpsed this home-coming, maybe from a wedding. At first glance, it looked like they were taking a cheerful step. The man was happily carrying his wife across the threshold and into their house. But the traffic stopped, and Tom was able to catch a longer look. He realized they were both graying, and much older than he first

thought. Then Tom saw the wheelchair from which the man had just lifted her. This wasn't a first easy step across the threshold. It was perhaps the thousandth hard step."³ He had pledged to be there in sickness and in health and he was making good on his vow.

That's the way it is with God. When life is harsh and we are exhausted and we feel we cannot take another step, God is with us to carry us over whatever threshold we need to cross. God's love heals, inspires, and brings light to the dark corners of our world. May our hope in a better tomorrow carry us forward.

NOTES

1. Janet Hunt, "Binding Up the Broken Hearted: Just Keep Breathing," December 6, 2020.
2. Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations* (Friends United Press: 1973, 1985), 3. This was shared by Richard Rohr in his Daily Meditations, December 24, 2020.
3. Tom Are, "Love Came Down," December 24, 2016.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

For shepherds in the field
keeping watch o'er their flocks by night,
the good news came in angel song —
praise that shattered midnight's stillness:
"Glory to God in the Highest!"

For Wise Ones in a far off land,
scanning the skies for signs of glory
the good news came as a traveling star,
eclipsing night's lesser lights
with radiant beams and beauty bright.

While we wait in the bleak midwinter,
searching for hope, seeking peace,
good news comes in a tiny babe —
born to parents, alone and far from home,
and laid in a lowly manger,
since there was no place for them in the inn.

Before the shepherds came to behold the babe,
before the magi kneeled before the newborn king,
the little family was tucked away in midnight's calm,
curled into the corner of a cattle stall,
cradling Emmanuel — God with Us.

God, you are *always* with us —
in our waiting, in our sadness,
in our worry, in our fear,
from dusk 'til dawn, in the darkest hours of night.
So, wherever we find ourselves —
sheltered in place all alone
or on the road, far from home —

you are with us.
You are *always* with us.
And with *you* we find
hope, peace, joy and love
that break through the darkness with the brightest light —
the Light of Christ.

Though, this year, many of our voices are silent,
the carols of our hearts ring out:
"Glory to you in the highest"
For now, more than ever,
this weary world rejoices that you dwell among us.
Tonight, we come to the manger to cradle Emmanuel,
to embrace the hope, peace, joy and love he brings,
to lay before him gifts of our love, gifts of our lives.
Lead us, then, to open wide our arms
and share these gifts with others.

You know, O God, how very weary this world is.
You know that families are scattered and finances stretched,
that homes are empty and hearts are broken.
You know how much has been lost.

And you answer as you did long ago —
by drawing close to us,
by piercing the darkness with an everlasting light.

In the bleak midwinter nights ahead,
help us bear witness to the light of Christ —
the light no darkness can overcome.
Even when we cannot glimpse the star's radiant beams,
may we point others to signs of hope.
Even when we cannot hear the angel's song,
may we boldly proclaim, "Peace on earth!"
This year, of all years, may we be startled by this good news of great joy,
and, like the shepherds, go out to tell the world the wonders we have seen.
And, like Mary, may we ponder this mystery in our hearts
and, then, respond with love and devotion all our days.

This we pray in the name of God, Emmanuel,
and offer the words he taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.