WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

"The Birth of Hope"
Scripture – Luke 2:15-20
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2023

Remember those riveting opening lines of Dickens' epic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*? "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."

Dickens penned these words in London in 1859. He was illustrating how London in the 1850s was nearly identical to the days that led to the French Revolution 65 years earlier. Of course, as we read these words in 2023, we are struck by how fitting the description is of our day. The battle between good and evil, the divide between virtue and vice, the disparity between rich and poor, describes our time, doesn't it? Death and despair dominate our news. Sin sick souls spew lies on social media to spark outrage. Children in school must be taught where to hide if bullets begin to fly. Hate groups multiply. Seas rise as glaciers melt. Anger and fear abound.

When darkness encroaches – both literally and figuratively – Christmas comes. And we gather this night not simply to shut out the world of venom and violence for a day, but to ask if there is any hope for a kinder, more peaceful world.

On this night, we remember the familiar words from Luke's Gospel: "In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." But I wonder if the rough edges of that edict have become too smooth with familiarity. When the Emperor spoke, people were compelled to jump. His mandate imposed great hardship on many.

Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, but his roots were in Bethlehem, so they had no choice but to make the 100-mile trek. The fact that Mary was on the verge of delivering her first child made no difference to government officials. The Emperor had spoken. So, "***Move!***"

As one New Testament scholar puts it, "They were faceless nobodies under the boot of an uncaring empire. Their only hope – if they had any hope at all – was not in Caesar Augustus, but in God who accompanied them even when they walked through the valley of the shadow of death."[1]

They arrived at an inn in the nick of time. No warm, cozy, room available they bedded down with the animals. Mary gave birth to a son, she wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid in an improvised cradle.

Darkness had descended and on a star-lit hill nearby, shepherds were half watching their flock and half dozing. It was a night like any other night – until a brilliant light sliced through the darkness. A messenger from God suddenly appeared to the shepherds and nearly triggered cardiac arrest! You remember the first words out of the messenger's mouth: "Do not be afraid."

It's doubtful that the pulse of each shepherd immediately returned to normal. Nevertheless, a multitude of messengers appeared and belted out with angelic voices: "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth."

The shepherds bolted for Bethlehem and found the babe lying in a straw manger more fit for cows. There they celebrated this world-changing event. The day when light pierced the darkness.

Chicago resident Jeanette Chung remembers an unremarkable December afternoon two years ago. "COVID was circulating with a doubling time of 1.5–3.0 days. Outside the hospital's makeshift drive-thru testing area, a line of cars wrapped around the block like a boa constrictor. On her way to pick up a COVID test, she noticed a young parking attendant bundled up in a heavy, drab parka and knit ski cap helping direct the traffic. Suddenly, the attendant burst into song:"

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining; It is the night of the dear Savior's birth…

"The parking attendant's spontaneous, robust rendition that afternoon was unforgettable. Chills went up Chung's back as she felt a rush of delight. She wondered what thoughts percolated through the parking attendant's head and what conviction welled up inside her to inspire that soaring solo."[2]

Her song changed the day for everyone within earshot. Light burst through the darkness and feelings of fear and despair melted.

We celebrate the birth of Jesus because he is the foundation of our hope. A quick assessment of the human race will reveal more despair than anticipation of a better future. Our hope is in our Creator who 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 are inclined to dredge up evidence that there is insufficient reason to hope. There are too many boulders in the path; the road stretches too long; 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. The Eternal One is in the business of piercing darkness with sparks of light. Hope is putting faith in God's vision of a better tomorrow, and then trusting the Divine Spirit to fill us with the confidence and the courage to partner with God in bringing 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."

We do not give in to despair because when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, God gave birth to hope. Jim Wallis of Sojourners writes, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change...Hope [without God] is nonsense, but hope [based on faith in God] is history in the process of being transformed. The nonsense of the resurrection story became the hope that shook the Roman Empire and established the Christian movement. The nonsense of slave songs in Egypt and Mississippi became the hope that led to the oppressed going free."[3]

When the light dims and the darkness gathers and dread dominates your thoughts; when your heart is filled with panic and your confidence has shriveled and your soul has been drained of joy, search for a speck of light. If you squint, you can see people extending compassion to patients in hospice. You can spot people calling for a cease fire. A few days ago, Camilla sent out an email asking for volunteers to serve meals to the hungry at Emmanuel Dining Room in 2024. Within two days, members of our church family had filled 46 of 48 spaces. Look closely and you will see teachers and mentors working with students who are struggling. When you feel surrounded by darkness, look for the light!

The message at Christmas is that the love of God will overcome violence and injustice. It does not come quickly and it does not come easily, but truth and love will triumph.

That is why Christmas ought to be celebrated with such joy. It is a powerful proclamation of hope. God loves each one of us and seeks to lead us to a new world. A world where every child is loved and every person respected. A world where everyone receives a fair shake and all settle their disagreements without violence. A world where love and justice intertwine to give birth to peace.

More than anything, the birth of Jesus is the birth of hope. Refuse to give in to despair because God so loves the world that God never stops piercing the darkness with light; never stops showing us a positive path to pursue, and never stops prodding us to make a more elegant and generous world out of the present one.

Hark! The herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn king.

NOTES
1. Thomas G. Long and Donyelle C. McCray, *A Surprising God*, (Westminster John Knox, 2021), p. 91.
2. Jeanette Chung, "Advent Devotions of Fourth Presbyterian Church," December 13, 2023.
3. Jim Wallis, "Let Justice Roll," December 16, 1990.

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