

Nativity of Our Lord (C)

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96:1-4, 7-13

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

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December 24, 2021

Grace and peace to you from Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, and God who came to be among us, and the Holy Spirit who dwells with all creation.

Trees are up, lights are on, presents are under the tree. Christmas is here! What always seems like a long time coming and preparing, especially for little ones, is finally here. In the midst of all that has happened and continues to happen, Christmas could not be stopped, Jesus has come into our lives. And that message, as familiar as it is, is still a beautiful message of hope and peace for all.

I think one of the things I like most about Christmas is, it's a time to remember the beauty of life that simply is. Not the glittery kind that clings to your clothes as it falls out of a Christmas card, or the tasty kind in bountiful feasts and treats, or even the exciting kind as anticipation builds over what is under the tree, but in the simple things. We hope, as Bing Crosby sings, for a white Christmas, for a chance to be with those we love, to share, laugh, remember and create new memories wrapped in the plain brown paper of a newborn God who came to be with us. It is a night of peace, when we in a frantic and fearful time and actually stop to hear the angels words of peace *to all*.

Our Christmas Tree at home isn't a designer creation by any stretch, but it's adorned with odd ornaments that span the years of our family. The first Christmas Ken and I were together we couldn't afford ornaments, so we made them. Salt dough, glitter, paint, Styrofoam balls and pompoms were expertly crafted for our tree. Over the years we've added many more homemade ornaments, some made by us and some by others. Some mark travel memories or new additions to the family. There are even some glass balls that are nearly older than our ages added together. When they come out for the season, we tell the stories of those years and those people who have been alongside of us through many Christmases. Especially these last two years, it's been a small way of remembering the importance of family connections, the longing for healing where ties are strained, of the history that provides a foundation for us, of God who loves us more than we can imagine. Topping our tree is what is now a *retro*-styled star. For nearly 40 years it has remained unlit atop our tree, until we come home from the Christmas Eve service. Its light tonight will once again be a small proclamation in our home of Jesus' birth.

I'm glad for such familiar and simple reminders. I find myself clinging to the basics these days. As for you, I'm sure, it's been a tough year for our family too. At every turn, when it seems just like all might be well, we've been thrown into another restriction, another wave, another family gathering or holiday away thwarted. We used to say things like, "when we get back to normal." Last Christmas Eve, I said,

"we are one people hoping on a vaccine, hoping to see our loved ones again, hoping for a return of those small, priceless moments together that we will never again take for granted. We long for more familiar times."

I never imagined then that we'd celebrate another Christmas by video.

We're learning that there is a new and unwelcome "normal" afoot. We're reluctantly learning to live in a pandemic. The disappointments, anxiety, grief, and fear that has accumulated for nearly two years has brought us close to a breaking point.

Tonight, surrounded by all this disruption, we hear again the Christmas story, with its familiar angels and shepherd, stars and stable animals. It is a *birthing* scene, not just for a Baby, but for a new era of hope and peace for a world in turmoil.

Mary and Joseph's lives were in upheaval too. An unplanned pregnancy and the accompanying shame in those days, arduous travel by government decree, no baby shower to welcome their first child, Roman soldiers to be wary of, no room at the inn, no family close by to assist in a time of need – but the time came and Jesus came and a new "normal" began for them.

What hasn't changed however, and never will change, is who was wrapped in swaddling cloths in the manger. You know him and he knows you, always has. There is no danger, no pandemic, no threat that can ever change that story. While there may seem to be little stability or certainty in our lives today, God is the peace the angels declared, the peace that passes all understanding, a peace that costs us nothing and yet cost Jesus his life.

Like the star over the stable, this peace stands in contrast to all that inhibits life and relationship. This peace is a light in our most difficult moments. Did you hear that unusual line in Isaiah, "all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire" (v. 5?) I always wondered and sometimes wanted to skip that verse on Christmas Eve, because it sounds very un-Christmassy, but I've learned that it's a powerful proclamation of an end to the unending types of violence in our world. The blood, sweat and agony of oppression of every kind, whether we are the oppressed or the

oppressor, will become fuel to be burned when the child is born. Battle fatigues will no longer be required. For Isaiah, that child was King David, who brought peace and hope to an ailing people. Today, the child is Jesus.

My prayer tonight, is simply that we would know God's peace is with us, that God came to be with us in these murky days. I pray that we would continue to remind one another and work together for a new normal where all are welcome and beloved, where we value creation, science and every person. I pray that we would endeavor to build bridges and connections in new ways that all may know God's goodness.

God's peace be with you all. Amen.