

Christmas Eve 2015

Luke 2:1- 20

Rev. Diane Ramerman

*Nostalgia for the past or hope for the future?*

Last week, there was a headline in our Skagit Valley Herald, “some revelers don’t stop at just one.” The article was about Christmas trees. There were stories of families with eight, ten or more trees in their houses. My favorite, Ms. Ferguson, reportedly has “a large flocked tree with feathered owls in the master bedroom; a peacock tree on the lanai; an upside-down tree featuring whimsical swimming fish; and six trees festooned with Swarovski crystal snowflakes, ivory swans, frosted ivy and white-squirrel ornaments.” Ms. Ferguson is quoted as saying, “It just gives you a warm feeling to look at the lights, to look at all the pretty little things all around and forget about your problems and issues of the day... I love Christmas,” she added. (There was also a comment that she started her decorating in September, and usually took a week off from work to complete it.)

Most of us are one-Christmas tree folks, still, almost every ornament has a memory attached. Who made it, or why we bought it, or where we were at the time. Our Christmas cards and gift wrappings portray snow falling, houses warmly decorated, stars shining brightly on a winter landscape. Nostalgia, pure... and simple.

Nostalgia is remembering the best of other times and other places when – at least in our recollection – life was simpler, happier, or sweetly exciting as we anticipated the family rituals, the gifts we might receive or planned to give.

Christmas nostalgia is a window to the past. And, it can also be an opening of heart and life to the *possibilities* of the Christian faith: the promise of hope, of a savior who will calm our fears about the future.

But when did the message of Christmas become (as Ms. Ferguson put it) ‘forget about your problems and issues of the day’? God came literally into the world to change it, to confront the conflicts, the injustice, the broken-ness. God came not to help us hide out, but to energize us, to look through the woundedness to a time of healing, to real God-is-with-us peace.

Our Christian *faith* is the antithesis of nostalgia. We look to the promise of a *future* time, when God’s peace will surround us. The Christmas story is not a time-out from reality, it heralds the incarnation of God’s vision for the world, the kingdom. Regardless of who you think Jesus was – prophet, revolutionary, Son of God – no other person has so changed the world.

God’s kingdom is not about authority; it is the expression of how the world will be the place of peace that God intends it to be.

God’s peace is not just the absence of war – it is much more.

What if the Palestinians ceased to battle against the separation barrier – the wall – surrounding

the City of Bethlehem? That wall is not the only one, there are other barriers in the Holy Land erected to keep Palestinians (both Christian and Muslim) off roads reserved for Israeli citizens. These separation barriers were created as a 'security measure' to protect Israeli (illegal) settlements on Palestinian land – what if these barriers were one hundred percent effective in confining the Palestinians?

If the violence between Palestinians and Israelis were contained by separation barriers, would that be God's peace? Where is the healing, the justice? Would not the true peace of God require them to live as intertwined communities, rather than walled-off opposed communities?

To understand the Christmas message, we need to look in the dirt and straw, in the deprivation, in places of hunger, hurt and broken-ness where the real story takes place.

Think about how the birth story unfolds. It's not just that God came, but how God came to be known to us: The young unwed Virgin Mary receiving God's angel, the long journey on foot into Bethlehem for the census, the birth in the straw of the animals' stable. The first proclamation of the birth of the Christ child was to shepherds from the fields surrounding Bethlehem. Shepherds – the unwashed, the unscrupulous, the lowest status. The angel comes, first, to them.

Who better to comprehend the promise of the birth of the Messiah than the outcasts in a broken world of political oppression and poverty?

The shepherds' first response to the angel of the Lord is terror. The shepherds are fearful, they have spent their lifetimes staying 'under the radar', in the fields and out of the reach of the power brokers of Rome and Judea. Now, they are called to a public role, as witness this birth.

Imagine their surprise - who, us? This King is *ours, for us*? Although this Child was God's own Son, he shared the living conditions of ordinary people. That very ordinariness, the messy circumstances of the birth, reassure the shepherds that *they* really may approach this King. And be a part of the kingdom. The shepherds go immediately to see the Child, and return full of wonder; they '*made known abroad what was told to them about this child.*' And, they '*glorified and praised God.*'

I recently visited a friend who is recovering from a stroke. Knowing he would not be able to be here in church tonight, I asked him what would be a meaningful Christmas message to him. "*What I want to hear, he said, is 'hang in there.'*" Isn't that the angels' message to the shepherds? "*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*" Hang in there. God has come into the world, here to heal the broken-ness.

Those who hear the Good News must testify to the light. And so the shepherds do. The world will be transformed, one person, one witness, one messenger at a time.

Other readings tonight tell us more about what the coming of this Child will one day mean. The prophet Isaiah says that the people will no longer walk in darkness (9:2).

Today, our communications and social media and our political leaders seem determined to have us live in terror, in darkness, rather than in peace and light. Terrorist bombings, fear of having a gun or fear of not having a gun, fear that any person who is somehow different (by race, or religion, or place of origin) is out to hurt us. Threats of terror attack on the New York school system, and the same in Los Angeles; four bomb hoaxes against Air France in the last three months. Presidential debates stir up and feed fear of ‘the other’, and invite paranoia about those ‘other’ who already live in our midst.

All of these things raise the level of individual and community anxiety, the level of fear – creating a kind of mass terror. We are tempted to hide, and to build bigger walls of separation rather than reaching out in compassion to our fellow human beings as Christ would have us do.

The Christmas message is ‘hang in there’, not ‘forget about the issues of the day.’ Hanging in there is not passive – we must actively engage in this transformation of the world – as messenger, as witness.

Transformation means changing the living conditions of the marginalized – like the shepherds, the homeless, the refugees of political and religious persecution in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.

Transformation means refusing to walk in darkness.

Transformation means offering hope to those who are dispossessed, to helpless bystanders, victims of political oppression, the sick, the lame.

The world will be transformed. One person, one witness, one messenger at a time.

The letter of Titus proclaims, ‘the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.’ Who is this “all” to whom salvation is offered? Us, you, them. All. Including ‘the other’, and any whom we have called enemy.

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. The power of response is in our hands.

Enjoy the Christmas nostalgia, yes, by all means. But let the light of faith shine on and through us. Do not be afraid. God is with us, whatever dangers are involved. God can use our hands in unexpected and amazing ways to continue the powerful work of changing the world for the better.

Rather than ignoring the troubles of the world, walling ourselves off, we should confront those conflicts where the human consequences are highest – how can we help, how can we be a healing presence, a voice of love not hatred?

Mary pondered what the angel Gabriel said to her in her heart, not in her head. To ponder in our

hearts outshines what our eyes see, or the words we know: let us ponder in our hearts the mystery of the holy birth and the presence of God.

Emmanuel. The Lord has come.

Amen.

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