

Christmas Eve Homily | December 24th, 2022

Rosie began the service this evening with ancient words from the book of Isaiah, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” (Isaiah 9:2)

In this last week of advent, leading up to Christmas Day, we find ourselves gathered here, having just passed through the Winter Solstice – the longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. Every year as we pass through December we are in a season of deep darkness in the literal sense of that word. Many of us wake to darkness, and return from work in darkness throughout advent. And this literal darkness, this lack of light, has an impact on each of us in different ways. Some of us settle into it, and some of us suffer from it, but no matter what – we all pass through it.

And in the midst of the darkest month of the year, following the tradition of the church calendar, we light candles each week and speak of a coming light.

When Isaiah prophesied about a great light coming to a people walking in darkness, he was speaking to a people suffering from the impacts of war and oppression. And in the midst of that turmoil and suffering, Isaiah proclaims peace and joy will come to Judah through the arrival of a baby “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)

So what does this prophecy have to do with us today?

In an advent reflection on this passage of Scripture, Scott Erikson writes this:

A government is a system of rule that implements the strategies and policies created to propagate healthy and wholistic ways of living together. Peace in this government can be accomplished a few ways.

You can destroy everyone who has differing opinions about your way - eradicating all innate agency and uniqueness found in the world - and end up with a government based on the rule of compliance and the threat of shameful destruction.

A kingdom of fear.

Or,

you can love the hell out of everyone by eternally offering your naked vulnerable self as a loving way that overcomes fear,

selfishness, greed, and death - prizing all innate agency and uniqueness found in the world as the very cornerstones on which to build a government focused on loving one another as one would love themselves.

A kingdom of heaven.

This second government was illuminated on the shoulders of a naked newborn prince. The announcement scared the powers so much that they killed innocent baby boys in the hope of snuffing out this incarnation. Later on, the powers successfully killed this incarnation in the hope that this way of being in the world would never catch on.

Two thousand years later, the powers are still trying to kill that way of being in the world. Two thousand years later, the kingdom of heaven still lives.”

I was thinking this week (as I do most weeks) about us, and this gathering here tonight. And as I did that I was thinking about why I've come to church on Christmas Eve over the years, which is something I only started doing as an adult, when Christmas traditions were up to me. For me, gathering together like this, in the midst of all the Christmas celebrations, has come from a longing to connect to the deeper meaning this season has to offer us. It's a moment to breathe, and it's a moment to let the mystery of the message break in.

I think a part of that mystery can be revealed to us through Rachael's advent Prayer we read together tonight, and I'd like to read it to you again. As I do that, I invite you to close your eyes and, as Teena has reminded me to do throughout the day today, to breathe. Just breathe. Breathe deeply.

(pause for breath prayer)

*We wait with Mary for Christ to be formed in us,
Daring to trust this hidden womb-weaving,
And treasuring the smallest signs of growth.*

*As Mary took heart to see
the wondrous swelling of Elizabeth's belly,
So the burgeoning life of God we see in others
encourages us that this sacred life grows also in us.*

*More and more, we long to bring Christ into the world,
Though we know that pain and labour accompany the birth of new life
As surely as joy and wonder.*

*Groaning and waiting,
Pregnant with hope and desire,
We prepare today a place for your coming,
Son of Mary's womb, and Christ of our own hearts.*

I love this prayer because it speaks of the invitation God continues to extend to us today. We are invited to carry this sacred life, and to be conduits of Christ in a weary world. Every one of us is chosen for this. We are invited to participate in the kingdom of heaven, God's intended reality, and the Good News that Christ proclaimed.

In a poem titled "The Work of Christmas Begins" Howard Thurman writes:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.*

I've been thinking about how those suffering through the wars and oppressions of today might respond to the prophecy of a coming peace, and I am sure these words are brought to life differently in the midst of such harsh realities. But I trust that they are brought to life, as they have been throughout time.

So we hold those suffering in this way (and in others) in our hearts even now, knowing that suffering touches all our lives somehow. And we let ourselves ache with the world for the arrival of hope, peace, love & joy. *That ache can be a prayer.*

You may have noticed that as I've been speaking the room has slowly darkened, and in just a moment I will invite you to join me up here in a circle, with the candles you received when you came in tonight.

Once we're all up here, the last lights will be turned off, and Jack has courageously agreed to help us light our Christ candle tonight.

But first, as we enter this moment of darkness together, I want to invite you to take another deep breath, and consider the places that need a little light in your own life, in your family, in this town, and in the world.

Because to those walking in darkness, a light has come, a child is born –

To close, I offer you this Christmas benediction from Nadia Bolz-Weber. She writes,

I believe that the Christ child is always born where he is most needed, where he is most cherished, where he is most potent. So wherever in your life you need this babe – that is always where he is to be found.

Whoever needs this baby...

It is unto you a child is born.

Unto you.

Unto you the mother without her own children.

Unto you an addict who can't keep clean.

Unto you the survivor.

Unto you who can't lose it because you have to keep it together for everyone else.

Unto you the bullied kid.

Unto you whose family never got you.

Unto you who lost your parents this year.

Unto you who doesn't know how in the world you can keep going.

Unto you.

Unto you a child is born. And also unto me.

And also unto me and all who already smell of sheep and grass and dirt.

Because the Christ child is always born wherever he is most needed. Wherever a soul needs to feel it's worth.

Merry Christmas, family.

Amen.