

December 24, 2015 – Candlelight Service



“God is With Us”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Those first “shepherds...saw the glory, heard the story, tidings of a gospel true. Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow, praises voicing, greet the morrow: Christ the babe is born for you.”

Like them, we come this night to see the glory, to hear the story—we bring our hope and our sorrow. We bring our longing to hear the great good news—that to us is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, Emmanuel. God-with-us. Christ the Babe is born for you.

I welcome you to worship on this holy night and pray that you, too, will hear the angels singing for you, and that their glad tidings will fill your hearts with joy and your spirits with hope and peace.

Do you know that there’s a full moon tonight, the first in 38 years? Now as an aside here, if you’re a Star Wars fan, this is apparently quite significant: a full moon 38 years ago, Christmas 1977, when the first Star Wars movie came out—and now again in 2015 as the latest premieres. Relevant? You be the judge. But even if all that is lost on you, it’s still true that the whole sky is lit up tonight and it may be even harder than usual on Christmas Eve for all the excited little ones to sleep with all that light pouring in.

It’s beautiful, the image of a star-lit, moon-lit sky, that large sphere of light throughout the heavens, a telescopic expanse of light narrowing down, microscoping down to focus a single beam of light on that stable in Bethlehem, on that little newborn child, wrapped in bands of swaddling cloth and lying in manger because there was no room for them in the inn. A tiny baby, born this night—news of great joy for all the people. And the angels sang: “Glory to God in the highest moonlit heaven; and on earth, from the light of that small stable place, comes peace to all of good will.”

The Word of God becomes flesh, Emmanuel, God with us. Right here and now. In this very world. In life as we know it.

And what a world this is on this Christmas Eve, 2015. What a mess we’re in. Like those first shepherds, there is much that would cause us to be confused and afraid and sorrowing. Like those first shepherds, our hearts long to trust the angels’ words: be not afraid, for good news of great joy has come for you and for all people.

I recently read a Christmas story that brings this home in a humorous way. It’s told by a colleague about the family of a retired Methodist minister. Seems that their family had put up their manger scene as they did each Christmas. Everyone contributed. They put in the animals, and Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus. It was all coming together quite nicely until little Scott, aged five, ran back into his room. He brought out his favorite dinosaur, Tyrannosaurus Rex, and brought it to the manger. He placed that big dinosaur there, towering over Mary, Joseph, and the Babe in the manger. There it stood, fierce and menacing.

The pastor said that his first thought was to explain to the boy that the dinosaur, the largest that ever lived, did not belong there at that manger in Bethlehem. But he stopped himself, thinking: ‘I realized that, in essence, my son had caught the truth of Christmas. For Christmas came to help us face the dinosaurs that life places before us. All those menacing terrors; all those dangers and fears that seem so strong and so powerful; Christmas came to defeat them.’ And so that Christmas, Tyrannosaurus Rex stayed at our manger.”

Isn’t that perfect? Maybe you want to go home and put one in your nativity scene tonight, because, face it—he’s in our hearts this Christmas, right? That big old scary dinosaur that sums up all the fears that loom so large and threaten to scare off whatever love and trust and peace and goodwill there might be for us in the bright moonlight of this holy night.

Tonight, anew, the Word of God becomes flesh for us, is born for us, for our hopes and dreams and dinosaurs. Emmanuel. God is with us. Christ the Babe is born for you.

Really, there's always a dinosaur at the manger. In different times, it takes on different names. It personifies different menacing threats. The poet, Madeleine L'Engle, said it well:

"God did not wait till the world was ready,
till... nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great,
...dined with sinners in all their grime, turned water into wine.
God did not wait till hearts were pure.

In joy God came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came, and that Light would not go out.
God came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

We cannot wait for the perfect time. For our God chooses to come to be with us in the time of our dinosaurs, whatever they may be.

If we find it hard to truly rejoice this night, held back in hesitation, grief, cynicism or doubt, the dinosaurs looming too large, perhaps the words of Martin Luther will entice us: "See to it that you do not treat the gospel only as history, for that is only transient; neither regard it only as an example, for it is of no value without faith. Rather, see to it that you make this birth your own and that Christ be born in you...Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times, and it would daily be sung into my ears in a most lovely manner, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own?"

Can Emmanuel, God with us, born this night, be as real for you, as powerful for you as any fearful dinosaur that ever existed, as anything that holds you hostage to fear and sorrow?

As we read in the Wisdom of Solomon: "For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, then leapt there down into me from on high, from the royal throne, your all-powerful word."

The writer Anne Lamott encourages us in this way: "You have to go on faith that the light shines in the darkness, and nothing, not death, not disease, not even government[s] cannot overcome it. I hate that you can't prove the beliefs of my faith. If I were God, I'd have the answers at the end of the workbook so you could check and see if you're on the right track as you go along. But...darkness is our context. Without it, you couldn't see the light. Hope is not about proving anything. It's choosing to believe this one thing: that love is bigger than [anything] anyone can throw at us."

Love is bigger than [anything] anyone can throw at us. That is the great good news of this holy night. So bring your dinosaurs to the manger, all of them. And find what God is doing in this marvelous, moonlit night. Choose to believe that God is with us, choose to believe that love is bigger than anything life can throw at us.

Are you ready? Can you see yourself here at the manger, in the Bethlehem of our heart, ready to receive this birth?

Earlier this afternoon, at our Family Service Christmas pageant, the best thing is that every child who comes can actually play a part. They get their costume at the door. We have wings for those who want to be angels. Crowns for those who fancy themselves kings. Wrapped headdresses for would-be shepherds. And as the story is told, they come forward to take their place at the manger.

So if you were to come to the manger this night, who would you be?

Perhaps you'd be a shepherd, reluctant, sorrowing, tired, stressed, outcast to the margins of society now invited into the heart of God's love? You could come, and put your burdens down, and rest. You could feel yourself included in, accepted, loved, whoever you are.

Or maybe you're one of those kings—successful, well-educated, moving among those with prestige and influence? Maybe it would be a relief to you to come and set all that aside, to kneel down, offer your gifts, feel loved for who you are in your heart of hearts, and pray to the Lord of Life.

Or maybe you would be drawn to those new parents, Mary and Joseph, tenderly cradling and comforting their child. Maybe you would kneel close to them to offer your support and counsel, offering your gifts in humble joy, your prayers for their newborn son.

Maybe you'd be one of the townspeople, fearful of the Roman soldiers, nearly giving up hope that the Messiah would really come and restore sanity to the world? Maybe you would come and let your hearts trust again and find your hope rekindled.

Or maybe you feel the lightness and the joy of the angels, singing joy and hope to all who need a word of encouragement and good cheer? Maybe you would join your voice in joy and praise?

There is a place here for everyone whose heart is open. There is love and peace and hope and healing and joy here for all. There is born here a love that is bigger and stronger than anything life can ever throw at us.

In a few moments, as we kindle the light of the Christ Candle and share that light throughout this sanctuary, passing it to one another, just as we will pass it to others when we leave this place--let us hear the good news: Christ the Babe is born for you, as we pray to God:

May the sounds of [this night] stir a longing in your people, O God. Come...to set us free from the dullness of routine and the poverty of our imaginations.... Let the ... trumpet blow... and make a place in our lives for the freshness of your love, well-lived in the Spirit, and still given to all who know their need and dare receive it."

Glory to God in the highest moonlit heaven; and on earth, peace and good will to all.

AMEN

Notes:

Tyrannosaurus Rex story adapted from "Making Room for God: Bethlehem of the Heart," sermon by Rev. Faith Conklin, Dec. 6, 2009.

Madeleine L'Engle. "The First Coming," from *A Cry Like a Bell*. Shaw Books, 2000.

Martin Luther. "Sermon for Christmas Day." Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Press, 1906.

Anne Lamott. *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace*. Riverhead Books, 2014.

Manger images adapted from "Let Us Go Now To Bethlehem," sermon by Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas at Grace Church, Amherst, Mass, Dec. 25, 2005.

Prayer adapted from Howard Thurman. *From The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations*. Friends United Press, 1985.

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