

November 27 – The Place of Miracles

Matthew 2:1-6

This Advent and Christmas Season I am going to be basing my sermons on a study called “Why this Jubilee?” It asks us to think about the message of this season as it is sung in carols. Each week we will highlight one of these great hymns of the church as we see its message for us, even to this day. Today we begin with “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

We need to hear, first of all, that the message of salvation, as seen in the birth of Jesus, is rooted in place and history. He was born in Bethlehem, King Herod was on the Judean throne, and Augustus was Caesar in Rome. Matthew and Luke wanted us to know Jesus was born at a definite time and place. They wanted us to see that the work of God was specific and not mythic.

It is still important to hear that the words, the promises of this season are for us now. They are not about something God once did or about some time in the future but now. One of the great messages of this season is that God loves us! We might want to dismiss this as inconsequential, but it is at the heart of this season. As it says in John 3:16: God so loves the world that God sends Jesus. It is God’s love for each of us that is the force behind the events that take place in Bethlehem. And, as Jesus would share, our task as a follower is to share that light. Now to the carol:

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the Everlasting Light”, we sing. Christmas decorations are all about lights. Think about the beautiful light displays we see around town. One of the most impressive is the one that the tribe installs each year. Some light displays are left on all the time. You drive by them during the day and they are unimpressive, almost invisible. Yet, at night they are glorious. In the darkness their light shines.

This, for me, is a reminder that no matter how dark of a time we or the world is going through, God’s presence and hope is shining. We may not always see it but it is there. Ultimately in the darkness we feel that love and compassion. It is a time where the goodness of people, even those who do not go to church comes out. Fred,

Ebenezer Scrooge's nephew, said it best. "But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round -- apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that -- as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!" So see the light of God's love shining in the dark.

We further sing, "The Hopes and Fears of all the years are met in thee." We all come to church with hopes and fears. Our hopes may be simple like "I hope I get my gifts mailed on time" to huge ones like "I hope for world peace." Often our fears are twined around our hopes. I hope my brother will live through Christmas, I am fearful he will not. I hope this family conflict will be resolved, I am afraid we will have an awkward Christmas. Sometimes we just have fears. What do these test results mean? Is one in my family going to find a job? This song reminds us that in the intersection between our deepest longings and our greatest fears we find God is present. We are not going through any of this alone. While this is comforting it is also challenging. If we want peace we need to be peacemakers. If we want family issues resolved so they are not hanging over us at Christmas we have to take the initiative. If we are feeling fearful we have to work on trust. In Advent we hear that God hears our fears and hopes but also challenges us to live faithfully.

I think of a young woman in one of my churches. She was passionate about taking care of the poor. She felt people, the government, or God should do something. One day she came home from college and announced to her family that she had signed up for a two year assignment with the Peace Corps. She said, "If I want the world to be a better place it needs to begin with me." She just finished getting her law degree and is working for a firm specializing in immigration law. Hope and faith intersected for her in action. God meets us in that intersection saying, as I was with the world in Bethlehem

with their hopes for a better future and their fears about oppression I am with you now. As I brought new life and hope to the world then I am at work now. Sing for joy.

Finally the carol has these words: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of God's heaven" Have you ever paused to ask, what do those words mean? What are the blessings of heaven that God places in each and every human heart? Here is what I believe. The Blessings of Heaven is God's love, as seen in the birth of Jesus. The Carol reminds us that God's deepest desire is to let us know that we are loved. In the minds of darkness there is light and in the middle of fears, hope. These are the blessings of heaven. We receive them through following the words of Jesus.

We all desperately need to feel loved. I sit with some of our elders when they are in hospital beds waiting for family to arrive to help them deal with this current medical crisis. They don't use the words, but it clear to me that in this scary time they want words of reassurance, to know that their lives matter. They want to hear from their children that they are loved. They want to hear from their church that they are loved. They want to hear from me that God knows what they are going through and sends love.

I visit with families as they are coping with issues, children or grandchildren in crisis, needing to move, elders with dementia. They are feeling scared. What do they need? You guessed it, to hear they are not alone and they are loved.

That is why the message of this season is so powerful. It speaks to that deepest need to know that God cares about us, especially when we are feeling lost, in darkness, in pain and in fear. We need to hear the gift of God's love is given. It is in our hearts and will shine brightly when we need it. So be open to receiving these gifts of love and support this holy season. Spend some quiet time with God being filled with light and with hope.

But even more, remember we are God's hands and God's agents of love for others. We are part of the way God imparts into human hearts that gift of love. We know friends who are living here in Sequim that have no family nearby. Some may not have

any visiting them during the holiday season. The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas can be one of the loneliest and most depression-filled times of the year. Covenant to spend time with some of the people who need to feel God's love. We know people who will be going through this holiday alone for the first time because their beloved passed away this year. Reach out to them. We know people who are worried because of health or family issues. Send them a card or call them.

We celebrate the love of God in Christ that comes to us. We also need to share that love with others. We help bring light into darkness, hope in the midst of fear, and love in the midst of loneliness.

In closing let me share one story. I went to visit in a care facility in my last church just before Christmas. His wife was dying. She knew it, he knew it. She had a few more weeks left but all knew that this was her last Christmas and he would be alone next year. I came to give them some of that love and support I had been talking about. When I entered her room I could sense something was different. She was sitting in bed and there was an alertness in her eyes that had been missing. He was smiling. What great change had happened? A group of children had just been caroling in the halls. When they got to her room they gathered around her bed and sang to her. They ended with a rousing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas!" They left them with a card. Nothing really special except the girls were about the age of their great granddaughter who was coming in a few days. In seeing them, hearing them, they began to anticipate that time with her. It reminded them both of the vibrancy of life and the joy of the season. For a few brief moments they could forget about the fear and the loss. It was a holy moment, a moment experienced because people took time to share and to pass on the love of God, to be that bright light shining in the dark.

What can you do this week to impart into another's heart the blessings of heaven?