

Sunday After Christmas: ...Is Born

Revelation 21: 1-6

Where did the year go? It seems only a few weeks ago we gathered to celebrate the feast of Epiphany as we welcomed in 2019. We talked about the year to come as being like a blank slate waiting for us, for life, for God to write upon it. Now as we look back, for some of us this year has gone pretty much as we expected. Most of us, however, found it to be full of surprises. We lost beloved people before we were ready to let them go. We struggled with health concerns that, at the beginning of the year, we did not even know we had. And yes, we had some wonderful, surprising and unexpected joy-filled moments too.

Today we conclude our month long look at the carol Silent Night. For those of you who were present on Christmas Eve it was magical to watch the flame move across the room as we sang it together for the first time. After delving deeply into a verse per week and being challenged by those words, it was a great joy to sing, to remember and to celebrate, Emmanuel, God with us.

The story continues. Even though we feel as if the Christmas "season" is over and the tree is quick to come down, we are still in the season of Christmas, as far as the church is concerned. In fact, we might be in the most important part of this holy season because in many ways the story that begins at the manger is also a story of how God continually nudges us toward new life and possibilities. This seems to be a major focus for many as we ponder a New Year. Have you made your resolutions? Even if we don't do this, at the minimum we need to be asking ourselves, "What is God trying to birth anew within me?" Each year should be a year of growth, new life, and new focus.

The passage from Revelation, with the vision of a new heaven and new earth, empowers us in our journey toward new life and possibilities. It reminds us that God is always inviting us into the future. God is reminding us that God is always with us and that we can and should know the light of God's presence now and always. We experience this light, in part, through the peace, joy, love and hope we have been talking about all month. Through them, we find the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. The words of Silent Night are a reminder of what it takes to experience fully Jesus' presence. As we are peacemakers, as we laugh at and with life, as we find and give

love and keep Christ central in our lives, we find that Christ is with us, has been born in us.

To hear that part of the message of Emmanuel, God with us, is a call to be birthed into new life. We might be confused as to what this means. We are like Nicodemus. He came to Jesus and was told he needed to be born anew. He had to ask Jesus what this meant.

So, what do we need to do to be born anew? Something that helps me answer that question is what I recently learned. In Italian they don't say that a woman has had a baby. What they say is that a woman has given a child "to the light." The baby comes out of the dark warmth of the womb into the light of the world. The mother gives the baby to the light of day! For me that is an incredibly powerful image for what we are called to be about.

So today let us think about a baby being born, but even more, our rebirth and what we need to do to embrace the light we are continually being birthed into. First of all we had to admit that there are parts of us that don't want this light. We are comfortable in the womb of complacency, comfortable habits and opinions and views of life that don't challenge us. If asked to change, we object. We no more want to move into the light of new beginnings than a baby wants to leave the womb. Even though great possibilities might await, we are happy where we are!

So we need to ask, "Where are we in darkness?" Where are we blocking the light of God's presence and love right now? Where have we felt the contractions of change but wished to ignore what is happening. But we know that we need to change if we are to find new life. Change is always hard. We often resist it. I want to ask you a question, "Where are you feeling birthing pains?"

We, as the United Methodist Church are feeling these birthing pains. We have comfortably gone along one path for decades and now if the road divides, what will that mean? This congregation is feeling the pains of change. We have grown accustomed to each other. You have gotten use to me as your pastor and now accept my walking around, waving my arms kind of preaching style as normal. You expect certain things from me and my leadership style. And, I have gotten to know you well. I know your sorrows and joys. I know your leadership styles and the way you interact with each

other. Yet, with my retirement all this is changing. The coming year will birth something new for this church. And many of you are facing known life changes that will happen in the coming year. You are not happy about them. Part of the message of this day is that God is calling us to be born again and just like a baby who enters the world crying we might not be happy about it!

How do you embrace change in a positive way? If we go back to the birth image, we know that a baby needs to fill their lungs with air to survive. Most give a lusty scream as they emerge but some need, well, “encouragement.” New life invites us to take in new gulps of breath. This is a poetic way of saying we need to embrace the changes coming to us.

Throughout the season of Advent we have been reminded of how God’s Spirit wants us to take in great gulps of the Spirit of Peace, to breath fully as we celebrate the joy of each day knowing that, no matter what is happening, God is with us. When we are feeling hurt or alone, to breath in God’s Spirit of Love and offer forgiveness to all. When we are feeling discouraged, to breath in the Spirit of God’s presence and face the future with hope. The hope that comes from being aware that God is with us. The hope that God’s Spirit of love is more powerful than those things that oppress us. The hope that each day brings with it infinite possibilities. The hope that God is lighting a candle in the darkness of our lives and this light will never be overcome. So this day breathe deeply God’s Spirit as you embrace the new of 2020. Being Spirit-filled is part of what it means to be born anew.

One more image. Some babies need to have their eyes cleared so they can open them and see. What might we be hiding from, shutting our eyes to? Where are we trying to live comfortably in the land of denial instead of seeing the road that is before us, perhaps a road that we don’t want to accept? The message of Emmanuel is that God’s presence and strength is always with us. We need to hear that maybe now is the time to step into that “glorious” (filled with light) existence with confidence. Change is scary. Admitting to new realities is hard. But with God, we can find new and exciting things await.

As we prepare for the beginning of a new year let us remember that the story of the birth of Jesus continues with the story of our re-birth now and in reality each and

every day. Hear a story of one who breathed deeply of God's spirit, saw life with new clarity, admitted that change was happening and trusted that God was birthing her into the light.

Her marriage had ended a few years ago. She was struggling to keep her head above water financially. The job she had did not pay well and there was no chance for advancement. She was afraid she was going to lose everything. One day she came in to see me. She shared how she had been praying for guidance but so far nothing. As I listened I began to wonder if there was a way forward. I finally asked, "What crazy idea have you had about how to handle this situation?" She smiled and said, "Well in my fantasy, I would sell my house, quit my job and go back to school and get a degree so I could do something I really wanted to do." After a few moments of silence I asked, "Why not?" She told me all the reasons it was impractical. I then said, "Any more impractical than where you are now?" She sat back in her chair stunned. "Well no. I am going to lose the house anyway, I can't afford it and this would be a way forward." She followed through on her crazy idea and a few years later had a good job with potential for advancement, was able to purchase a new home and life was good. Once she embraced the changes happening and trusting God was with her she was born anew.

The question I want to leave you with is this, "How can we live in the light as a follower of the Light of Life?" Even more, how can we live in such a way that as followers of the one whose Star shone on humankind, we work to bring "peace on earth, goodwill to ALL creation," so that a new heaven comes to this new earth?

To answer that question always means change and re-birth. May we embrace the future with hope. May we in 2020 give ourselves to the light.