

“Hope”

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve 2020

The recent front-page article of our newsletter, which I titled “Disappointing Christmas,” caused a few of you to think I was lapsing into some kind of clinical depression! Perhaps wishing everyone a “Merry Disappointing, Less-than-optimum, Crappola Christmas” wasn’t such a good idea in hindsight! I’m actually doing fine, but along with many of you, I’m finding this to be a difficult Christmas with losses of all kinds, restrictions, and just being tired of the virus. It is a very different Christmas all of us, as evidenced by the fact that you’re spending Christmas Eve at home, rather than sitting here in a crowded sanctuary with family and friends!

This Christmas has stripped away many of the things we rely on for joy and meaning and hope. Gathering with friends and family- gone. Feeling safe with regard to our health- not this year. Beloved religious rituals- gone. Some of you have even lost family members to Covid, or are waiting to see how family members afflicted with the disease are going to do. With all of these losses, where do we look for joy, meaning, and especially for hope? The Christmas story itself gives us some direction.

We begin reading in Luke 2:1. *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.*(Luke

2:1) It's easy to skip over this verse, but it really sets the stage for what is to come. Luke tells us that Jesus' birth took place during the reign of Caesar Augustus, emperor of the Roman Empire for over 40 years. He brought about what was known as the Pax Romana, peace over the whole empire, and he was hailed as Lord and Savior of the world! "Lord and Savior!" But the fact that Luke mentions Quirinius as governor of Syria reminds us that all was not calm and peaceful. Quirinius was appointed as a military governor to put down persistent rebellions and uprisings in Syria and the surrounding area.

Rome brought about its peace, its Pax Romana, through brutal oppression and military force, crucifying thousands of those who dared to oppose its rule. Israel, where Jesus was born, was a hotbed for such rebellion, and the Romans were hated there. But, the Romans were superior in military might and culture and technology, extinguishing any hope the people had for liberation. Ordinary people, like Joseph and Mary, lived in grinding poverty. They were forced to travel to Bethlehem at the worst possible time because of an edict of their occupiers. The title of Christina Rossetti's poem, "In the Bleak Midwinter," describes that first Christmas pretty well. There was little hope in Israel at the time of Jesus' coming, just as many find it hard to find hope this Christmas.

Fortunately, Luke's story doesn't end there! Angels appear to the shepherds. *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: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.* (Luke 2:10,11) Notice that the angels bring good news of great joy for ALL the people. Not just for the Romans. Not just for the rich, who collaborated with the Romans and prospered under their rule. Not even just for the Jewish people. The coming of Jesus was good news for all people- people like you and me!

And what is this good news? A child is born! A child like no other. The angels describe him in three ways. First, he is a Savior. Now the Romans thought they already had a savior- Caesar Augustus, remember? But, this was a Savior for all people, who would save people from their sins, freeing them to re-connect with their Creator and fulfill the purpose for which they were created. In fact, he came to save you from your sins, however bad they may be, and to help you to re-connect with your Creator! That is certainly good news. But there's more.

This child is the Messiah, the long-promised deliverer of God's people, Israel. The Messiah will bring about righteousness and justice for all the people of God. And, he will eventually free them from foreign domination. That was certainly Good News for the Jewish people.

Finally, this child is the Lord. He is the Creator God in the flesh. As Charles Wesley wrote in his carol, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate Deity!" If you want to know what God is really like, look at Jesus, because there he is! But this claim about Jesus created a problem. The Roman Empire already had a Lord, Caesar. Everyone in the empire was required to acknowledge that Caesar was Lord in an annual ceremony. Early Christians were good citizens, but they refused to participate in this ceremony at great personal cost. Why? Because they believed that Jesus is Lord, the ultimate authority over all things- over creation, over governments and politicians, over money, over churches, over businesses, and over you and me. And we're still working out the problem of the competing loyalties that creates to this very day. Jesus is Savior, Messiah, and he is Lord.

And that brings us back to hope. Now it's nice to say that Jesus is Lord, that he will bring about justice and peace, but it's been 2000 years since his coming. Is there any evidence that his coming has brought about justice and peace? I think so! Consider his impact on children. Children in the ancient world were routinely left to die of exposure, particularly girls. But followers of Jesus believed there was inherent value in every person- young or old, boy or girl- so they rescued these abandoned children, created orphanages, and worked to outlaw the mistreatment of children.

How about education? In ancient times education was valued, but usually reserved for the elite. Followers of Jesus worked to create universal literacy, again based on their belief that every person has value. They founded monasteries for study and then universities. Cambridge, Oxford, and Harvard all began as Jesus-inspired efforts to love God with all one's mind.

Jesus' compassion for the poor and sick inspired the creation of clinics and hospitals all around the world, and research to cure some of the world's worst illnesses, many of which have been eradicated or brought under control.

And, Jesus taught a radically new ethic- forgiveness of those who have wronged you. The ancient world believed you should punish your enemies, which seems just, but leads to an unending cycle of reprisals. Jesus taught a better way. Love your enemies. This idea has led to countless resolutions of conflict between individuals, families, tribes, and entire nations.

Finally, the plight of those who are excluded in many societies- women, slaves, and people of color- has been improved wherever Christianity has taken hold in countries all around the world. For example, Christians were at the forefront of the abolition of slavery in England and then in this country.

So, while there is much left to do before peace and justice is the norm for all people, followers of Jesus have had a major impact in these areas in places near and far. His coming has already made a real difference. And that is reason for hope.

In December of 1863, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow sat down to dinner with his children in their Massachusetts home. It had been a rough couple of years. His wife was killed in a fire two years before, permanently scarring Longfellow in his attempt to save her. The beard he wore was to hide his scars. Earlier that spring, his oldest son, Charley, began to serve in the Union army, and he had just received a telegram telling him that his son had been severely wounded in battle. Surgeons believed he would probably survive, but that he might be paralyzed.

So, here he was- a 57 year old widower with six children, stricken with grief, worrying about his ailing son, and horrified by the war that had ripped his country in two. As he heard carolers and church bells celebrating Christmas, Longfellow wondered if it could all really be true. So, he wrote a poem outlining his thoughts. I'll read part of it to you now. I think it really resonates this year.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day

Their old, familiar carols play,

And wild and sweet

The words repeat

Of Peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,

The world revolved from night to day,

A voice, a chime,

A chant sublime

Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth

(Of) cannon thundered in the South,

And with the sound

The carols drowned

Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;

“There is no peace on earth,” I said;

“For hate is strong,

And mocks the song

Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:

“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep:

The Wrong shall fail,

The Right prevail,

With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

Just like Longfellow discovered in 1863, in the midst of turmoil and pain, Christmas reminds us that God is not asleep. He is active in human affairs, having sent his own Son to bring us salvation and peace and hope. May it be so for you this Christmas.