

A Crisis of Hope

Luke 2:1-20; Matt. 1:18-25

12/24/21

When Bill Clinton ran for President in 1991, his biographical sketch opened with these words, “It all began in a place called Hope...” which referred to his birthplace of Hope, Arkansas. But it also tapped into a need for hope that people were feeling at the time, and helped to catapult the virtually unknown governor of Arkansas into the presidency. In 2006 Barack Obama published a book entitled, “The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream.” It would help launch his candidacy for president, once again resonating with people’s need for a sense of hope in the midst of the problems we were facing as a country.

Unfortunately, today’s sense of hopelessness dwarfs that of those earlier times. The pandemic continues to overwhelm and confound both Republican and Democratic leaders. The emergence of the Omicron variant confronts us with a very uncertain future in the coming weeks and months. And just when we need them most, many people have lost faith in our most basic institutions, including our government, the courts, science, journalism, schools, and even churches. We are facing a crisis of hope today!

Into this crisis comes Christmas. Can Christmas give us any hope? Real and lasting hope, that is, not some ephemeral holiday feelings. I think the romanticized Christmas, with its pretty decorations, lots of food, visits with family

and friends, and a sanitized version of the original Christmas story simply lacks the power to provide us with any hope for the real-world problems that confront us today. The challenges we face are simply too strong and will overwhelm the good-hearted, nostalgic feelings of the season.

But the real story of Christmas is different. And I think it does have the potential to bring us real hope this year. Let's think about what was going on in first century Palestine. Luke lays it all out there for us when he begins the story by talking about Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor. In those days, the massive Roman empire included little Palestine, a country that continuously resisted Roman occupation with uprising after uprising. Because of that, Roman soldiers would have been a common sight in that little town of Bethlehem. And they would have been hated.

And it gets worse. Caesar is conducting a registration, a census. This is a registration of people and property. Why? So he will have the necessary records to impose additional taxes on the Jewish people! Taxes that will go back to Rome. People hated this so much that during a Jewish revolt a few decades later, the first thing they did was to burn those tax records in every town! Meanwhile the Jewish people were at odds with one another over how to respond to Roman oppression. Some, like the Sadducees and tax collectors, cooperated with the Romans, securing their own wealth and power. Others, like

the Essenes, lived in hermit-like communities seeking to isolate themselves from the troubles of this world. The Zealots favored violence against the Romans, using guerilla tactics and attempts at widespread rebellion. Communities and families were deeply divided over this. Most people just tried to make the best of a grim situation in which grinding poverty was the norm.

That's the real-world setting for the first Christmas- a time of uncertainty, injustice, oppression, and deep divisions. A time without much hope. Into that world- a world that has a lot in common with our world- Jesus was born. And that is good news, because if the real message of Christmas can work in that kind of world, perhaps it can work in ours, too.

So, what is the message of Christmas? Listen to these words from Matthew's gospel. An angel is speaking to Joseph.

*...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."*

(Matt. 1:20b-23)

Joseph was caught up in a personal crisis in which his life has been turned upside down by the news that his fiancée, Mary, is pregnant. And the child isn't his! But the angel brings him a word of hope, saying that the child will be called, "Emmanuel," which in Hebrew means, "God is with us." And that's where our hope comes from. God is with us. On the first Christmas, God took on human flesh and was literally "with us" here on planet earth. That's the core message of the Christmas story!

But God is with us in another sense, too. God is on our side! God clearly values his creation and is willing to go to great lengths to buy us back from evil, which is demonstrated in his becoming one of us. Because he became human, God can understand the full complexity of what it means to be human. And God can even overcome the social evils that plague us. God is on our side!

We've seen glimmers of that as poverty rates around the world have steeply declined in recent years. We've seen it when Jesus' followers have advocated for the end of slavery and child labor. When they have joined movements to demand civil rights for African Americans, women, and LGBTQ people. Admittedly, we've taken steps backwards at times from our progress, but overall we are still moving forward, which gives us hope that with God's help we'll make still more progress. God is with us! The message of hope was effective back in biblical times and it's effective today.

And the Christmas message of God's presence with us transcends particular circumstances. It give us hope that we can deal with whatever personal darkness afflicts us- in relationships, in addictions, in particular sins, in illnesses. There is hope for our country, that we can deal with the challenges that confront us as a nation at this time. And there is hope for our world, that we can meet the challenges of climate change, tribalism, war, and the pandemic.

At a former church, I came alongside one of our church members, Mark Wenzlaff, as he dealt with a grim cancer diagnosis. He shared a letter with me that he had written to his cousin. He wrote, "My pastor and I were chatting the other day about my condition and how it affects me. I remarked to him that I've received many kind prayers from people I don't know, as well as from our congregation. What permeated most of the conversations was the other person's belief in miracles, the cancer that has gone to remission, etc. I said that I was touched by all of that, but it's my belief that while the wishes of miracles are heartfelt, they somehow miss the point. That point being, God is with all of us, all of the time. That's the true miracle I think most people miss...God never leaves us. He will always give us what we need and hold us in his arms when we don't understand what He's trying to tell us or do for us." (end quote)

Mark understood the real message of Christmas. God is with us. And it sustained him through a long battle with cancer that ultimately led to his death.

He experienced the fact that God is with us in the real world today. That means that God is with you in your real world! So how do we respond to this message?

First, we learn to trust God. Mary and Joseph certainly did that, and they would continue to do that as they were soon forced to flee into Egypt to escape murderous King Herod. We can learn to trust God, too. Maybe in small steps at first- one day at a time- and then in larger matters. God is with us. We can trust him with our lives!

Second, we can join in his work in the world. That's what Jesus spent a lot of time teaching about- how God is working in the world to bring about justice and compassion and forgiveness. When we see people working for those things, we can join with them, knowing that God is with us. So join us in hope. It's one of the many gifts that God offers us because of Jesus' coming. It's one that will last into eternity.

### Silent Night story

On Christmas Eve 1818 in the Austrian town of Oberndorf, Josef Mohr, a young priest, was preparing for the Christmas Eve services when catastrophe struck. The pipe organ wouldn't play! After trying to troubleshoot the problem, he gave up and desperately tried to figure out what to do for music at the Christmas Eve services. He remembered a poem he had written a few years

back and took it to a local schoolteacher named Franz Gruber, who also served as the church organist. He asked him if he could write a simple tune for the poem that the choir could sing that evening! And, it would need to be accompanied by guitar, since the organ wasn't working. Gruber went to work, wrote a tune to Mohr's words, and Silent Night was sung for the first time that evening!

You may have noticed that we haven't had organ accompaniment this evening, either! That's because our organ is being renovated and due to supply chain and labor issues, isn't ready for us this evening. So, we're going to sing Silent Night tonight accompanied by guitar, just like that Christmas Eve in 1818! As we sing, we'll pass the light from the Christ candle to one another and then reflect in silence together for a few moments. Remember to pull your mask down when it's time to blow out your candle!