

Church on the Mall
December 24, 2014
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill
Luke 2:1-20
“Treasured Words”

We gather here together as brothers and sisters in Christ, on this holiest of nights, to welcome the Christ child into our midst. Our Advent waiting and preparation finds its culmination tonight as we hear the words of this sacred text retelling the birth of Jesus to his mother, Mary in a stable in the town of Bethlehem. This beautiful story in Luke reaches into the depths of our Advent darkness and illuminates the light of Christ that is born for all people on this hallowed night.

We celebrate Christmas just a handful of days after the winter solstice, which is no coincidence. Since the 5th century, early Christians chose this dark, winter date to celebrate Jesus’ birth, even when it is argued that surrounding circumstances make a spring birthdate more plausible. We harken back to the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” Tonight in midst of long, dark nights, we rejoice in the light of the world that comes to shine upon us. Tonight, in the midst of long, dark nights, we rejoice in the good news of great joy that is for all the people, that unto us a child is born, and unto us a son is given.

Our Christmas festivities and Advent celebrations couch this birth and this celebration in a joyous, upbeat setting. We sing carols as we decorate our Christmas trees; we hang lights and light fires in the fireplace; we invite family and friends to join

in Christmas cheer, relishing the relationships that bring us intimacy and love. We plan our Christmas mornings, spending time with children, opening special packages, relaxing in the warmth of loved ones. Our Christmas celebration is imbedded in happiness and love and all good things. But that was not so that first Christmas night. The favored and blessed Mary is no superstar in her town; she is an unwed, pregnant teenager. Her pregnancy is not watched like the pregnancies of royalty; this is no Kate Middleton, or Princess Kate birthing moment. Mary is forced by the government to travel when such adventures would be risky, if not at least uncomfortable. Arriving in Bethlehem, the chaos of everyone returning to one's hometown means even this pregnant woman great with child does not find priority in a bedroom, but is forced to stay out back with the animals. A dingy stable, away from home, we can imagine the weariness on Mary's face, the concern on Joseph's, perhaps even doubt – is this really how the story goes? Is this really how the narrative of God's salvation is going to unfold? Did they hear those angels correctly?

Of course we know, this is the ideal set-up and the stage for the birth of Jesus could not be set more perfectly. We don't need the light of the world to shine in well-lit inns. We don't need new life to be born in quaint houses with well-groomed lawns. We don't need the power from on high to come to peaceful, fair governments. We need the light of the world to shine in dark stables, dank street corners, shadows full of addictions and grief, darkness that haunts us with past regrets and painful memories. We need new life to be born in places of poverty and despair – where people struggle with enough to

eat and having clothes that fit; places where people get lost in a spiral of depression and hope is elusive. We need the power from on high to break into oppressive government systems and reveal God's justice and compassion. We need God's presence to reach into the tender, vulnerable places in our lives with hope and redemption so that our troubled souls will be transformed by divine peace and spiritual joy.

On this sacred night, as we hear the words of the angel proclaim to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy that is for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord," we know that this divine proclamation is for us - just as the angel clarified – to you, to you is born this day. We savor these sacred words and the pure beauty and complete fullness of what this means for the world and our lives. It's in this moment that we know God is making good on God's promises foretold by the prophets; it's in this moment that we know in the core of our being that God is always faithful to us. We are not left to wander in the darkness, we are not left to clean up the mess of our own sin, we are not undone by the world's evil, but God has come to be with us, to offer us new life, to walk alongside us, to bring light to creation, to surprise us with second chances and new beginnings, to show us grace and mercy, to bring us salvation. Today is a new day; today God is doing something new; today God has broken into our world – God-with-Us – Emmanuel.

When Mary receives these strange visitors, these dirty, rough shepherds wandering away from their flocks in the middle of the night to see her new baby, she

listens to the story they retell of the angels and the heavenly chorus. She hears the angels telling them to not be afraid. She hears that this birth of her son is good news of great joy that is for all the people. She treasures these words and ponders them in her heart. Mary's call to be the mother of the Messiah is a challenging, hard, soul-wrenching call. As we follow Jesus' ministry and mission, it is not hard to assert that being his mother would be a difficult task. I imagine these treasured words from the shepherds are spiritual nourishment for her journey as Jesus' mother. Remembering not to be afraid; remembering that this child is good news of great joy for all the people.

These serve as our treasured words as well, when we find ourselves grappling with hard decisions, when discipleship becomes hard and discouraging, when we find ourselves in times of despair, wondering what is next for our lives. Throughout the year we will draw strength from these words, serving as a reminder that God's light comes, that new life is born, that death and darkness do not have the last word in our lives.

As we leave the stable the day after next and head back from Bethlehem to our ordinary lives, in many ways, we may feel as nothing has changed. The nagging grief that won't let us go, the financial worries as we head into retirement, the loneliness and darkness that still touches that soft space in our souls: we want to feel differently, we want to know God's peace, we want new beginnings, but can't seem to find them. So we take these treasured words with us as we go and we keep them safe and we trust their truth. We persevere in whatever aches and longings and troubles we face, and we search out the new life those shepherds ran with haste to find. We believe this good

news of great joy; we believe that God is still breaking into our world and our lives today in real, tangible, life-giving ways; we knock on every stable door searching for this new life. The truth of these treasured words is that new life and new light does come – often times at unexpected times and in unexpected places.

A light shines in the darkness; and the darkness did not overcome it. Friends, unto us, today, a child is born, unto us, today, a son is given. Let us go with haste to find this new life as we embark on a new year of being church together. Let us go with faith to find this new life, believing that God is doing something new even today, in our midst. Let us go with diligence and determination, leaving no stone unturned as we seek out God's presence in our congregation, in our community, and in our lives. Let us live as joyful disciples of Christ, knowing that his salvation has come even for us. Let us be about the business of searching for light in the darkness and finding hope in the midst of despair. Brothers and sisters in Christ, unto you a child is born this day who is the Messiah, your Savior, your Lord. Thanks be to God for this gift of all gifts, this light of all lights, this hope of all hope, this life of all life. Amen.