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Christmas Eve, December 24, 2018
Christmas Eve /Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 2:1-20
Sermon Title: “Hope Has Come”

Theme

God’s greatest gift comes as a baby in a manger. Angels announce the “good news of great joy” and proclaim God’s blessing of peace.

Text

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sermon

Merry Christmas everyone.

Isn't it interesting that "Merry Christmas" is the standard greeting? Why not "Happy Christmas;" or "Joyous Christmas;" or "Cheerful Christmas;" or "Exuberant Christmas?" Why did none of these greetings work, and how did "Merry" make the mark? These are the things that are on my mind this evening.

But of course, Christmas, though ancient by our standards, wasn't always a thing, – like before Christ came.

You will recall that at the time of the Nativity, Judea was an occupied nation. The Romans had been in power since 63 BCE, but before the Romans it was just another nation that occupied them. In fact, God's people had not been an autonomous nation since 721 BCE, so for over seven hundred years, they were very little about which to be happy, joyous, cheerful, or exuberant, let alone merry. In fact the Israelites, it could be said were in despair, and another word for despair is hopeless. And it was into that hopelessness that God called the prophet Isaiah with a word of hope.

Though it is difficult to know for sure, scholars think that Isaiah's ministry began around 740 BCE, a time just before things really went badly for Israel – bad in the way that most nations would consider bad. But God, you see, has always been more interested in the spiritual well-being of his people than their nationalistic pride or wealth or land or conquests. So with regard to their spiritual well-being the nation of Israel was already in trouble.

In this well-known prophecy that we hear every Christmas Eve, Isaiah started out by just naming it, 'The people walk in darkness.' That is prophet talk for hopelessness.

But since it is a prophecy, Isaiah was speaking about an event sometime in the future, and so what he actually said was,

**²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;**

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

Whether the Israelites know it or not, whether their leaders know it or not, they are headed into a time of hopelessness. But before that ever happened Isaiah was given a word to tell the people.

They will see a great light. Light is the opposite of darkness, and darkness is hopelessness, therefore a great light means hope. Hope is coming! In about 700 years.

Now it's pretty clear that something was going to have to happen to break the hopelessness. What do you think has to change for this to happen?

- The king might say they need a bigger army and more effective weapons.
- The politicians might say they need to raise taxes.
- The priests might say they need to make sacrifices.
- Someone else might say that they need a Strategic Visioning Process to figure out their Mission, Vision, and Core Values.

But notice what Isaiah said. Without reading it for you again, I'll tell you that he said the people don't have to do anything. God is going to do it all. The "great light" is a gift of grace. Speaking of what God will do, Isaiah said in verse 3 that

³*You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy*

⁴*For the yoke of their burden,
you have broken*

⁷*The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

So, no amount of weapons or taxes or sacrifices or strategic planning will outdo the love of God and God's will for his people. Isaiah said and I paraphrase, "Our only hope is in the LORD. Never give up on hope."

And how was that hope to come? Isaiah answered that in verse 6:

⁶For a child has been born *for* us,
a son *given to us*;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Some seven-hundred years before it happened, Isaiah prophesied that the long awaited messiah would be a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

Do you think that was who the Israelites were hoping for? A peasant baby boy will come to the rescue? And will he be a great leader of the people? A great military leader? A great politician?

No! But then, God's value system has always been at odds with the world's.

Well then, what is this hope that Isaiah prophesied about? I am so glad you asked.

This Advent season we have been fussing with the concept of hope, but I think what I have not yet done is answer the question, "What is hope?"

Among our children tonight there is a lot of hope; hope for a special toy or gadget or gift that they long for.

And among parents there is a lot of hope too; hope that they have gotten the right gift for their children and other loved ones.

But the luster of those gifts will pass in time. The hope I am speaking of is the desire of every godly person's heart and that is the *hope of glory*. It has always been that way, though just what *glory* is has changed over the generations.

In the OT days, the Israelites thought that that meant a return to the glory days of David (i.e., autonomous rule, respect among nations, prosperity for its people, etc.). But as I said earlier, God has always been more interested in the spiritual well-being of his people than their nationalistic pride or wealth or land or conquests.

And therefore in the NT as Jesus Christ taught it, the *hope of glory* began to mean the *saving* that he would accomplish. But that *saving* was not from their mortal enemies, but from their spiritual enemies. That is a different thing altogether and not what many in Judea hoped for at the time of the birth of God's Messiah.

It was the evangelist Luke, not a first-hand eye-witness to any of the events he wrote about, who wrote the Gospel Reading that we read every Christmas Eve that we love so well.

Luke took great care in recording the place in time of those events as best he could. It is as if he knew some would prefer darkness and hopelessness and so he was as specific as he could be. I wonder if he thought that that would make the implausibility of the story of the peasants Mary and Joseph more plausible. Of course, the detail also made the nativity the realization of those ancient prophecies that foretold how all this was to go down.

Much has been said about the first witnesses of the nativity being lowly shepherds who were told of the event by angels. They were just ignorant and hopeless enough in their miserable lot in life, that leaving their sheep on the hillside overlooking Bethlehem to see if what they were told was real, was worth the risk. I mean, what if it was true? Wouldn't you go to check it out? Hope in this heavenly proclamation was all they had.

And when they arrived at the stable in Bethlehem, they saw with their own eyes that what they had hoped for was true! Everything was just as the angels had told them it would be. Hope had come! Can't you just feel it?

No?

Ya know, we preachers were talking last week about Christmas Eve and how there is this pressure we feel to bring it, ya know what I mean? To really bring it?

I'm not there yet am I? Well, I'm not done yet either.

You see, hope is more than just the lack of despair.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ has got this, that God is always working for our good.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ still loves us no matter how successful we are or how big a failure we are.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ loves us even when we feel unlovable.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ is with us in our struggles against addiction.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ is our savior, which by definition means we are saved.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ – who, by the way defeated death – is our death-defeater on our side.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ died on a cross for us – he thinks we are worth it and that is where we get our value as persons, not from our job or career or any other thing that the world values.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ never forsakes us though GM and other human institutions may turn their back on us.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ will somehow make something beautiful out of the Parkcliff Avenue tragedy, just a few blocks away for here.

Hope is trusting that God revealed in Jesus Christ holds the victims and their families of Tree of Life Congregation massacre in Pittsburgh in his merciful care.

I could go on, but you see, we have a lot to celebrate tonight because “Hope Has Come!”

Isaiah foretold it. “Hope Has Come!”

The heavenly host of angels sang it. “Hope Has Come!”

The Shepherds witnessed it with their own eyes. “Hope Has Come!”

Christians all around the world tonight sing it: “Hope Has Come.”

And tonight I proclaim it: “Hope Has Come.”

And you gathered right here right now are left with only one decision, “Do I put my hope in this story or not.” To choose not to will ultimately lead to despair because everything else you may treasure will let you down like that hoped for Christmas gift that will lose its luster.

But oh, to hope that God revealed in Jesus Christ has come, that changes everything now, and in eternity. “Hope Has Come!”

Happy, joyous, cheerful, exuberant, merry Christmas everyone!