

Weekend of Sunday, December 24, 2019
Christmas Eve Traditional Service/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7
Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14
Gospel Reading: Luke 2:1-20
Sermon Title: “Light of Light”

Theme

In winter’s deepest night, we welcome the light of the Christ child. Isaiah declares that the light of the long-promised king will illumine the world and bring endless peace and justice. Paul reminds us that the grace of God through Jesus Christ brings salvation to all people. The angels declare that Jesus’ birth is good and joyful news for everyone, including lowly shepherds. Filled with the light that shines in our lives, we go forth to share the light of Christ with the whole world.

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. The regular attending membership knows this, but if you are a visitor with us tonight, we have a little ritual we do every time we gather. I remind those in attendance that, "You belong here" to which they reply, "We belong together." Maybe we could try it, just to make everyone feel more at home. "You belong here. We belong together."

Thank you for that. We say that each week because it is true. All people, Christians or not, believers or not, are the creation of the same Creator. And so, whatever your reason for being here tonight, whether it is because you are a believer and you want to celebrate the birthday of the King of the Universe, or because it is an old family tradition, "You belong here. We belong together" this night of all nights.

This Advent season at Zion, we have been using the traditional Advent themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love to give structure to our worship. Each week we tried to find that week's particular emotion in the prescribed readings for the day. Sometimes that emotion was not obviously present, but even when it wasn't obviously there, we brought it in.

I think at this particular time, this is the right thing to do. Hope, Peace, Joy and Love are godly emotions and if we allow ourselves to get too sucked into the culture around us, our lives could easily become void of all those emotions. And so, just as we did each weekend, bringing that particular emotion into worship even when it wasn't obviously there, we, you and I, need to find Hope, Peace, Joy and Love wherever we can. And if it can't be easily found, and sometimes it isn't, we believers have a responsibility to bring it.

A few moments ago we heard that beautiful Lukan Nativity story read. And it is that story that we enjoy hearing on Christmas Eve whether we are believers or not.

Everyone loves a baby. We baptize babies in the Lutheran tradition, and I just baptized two a few weeks ago, and have three more coming up.

I wish everyone could see what I see when I hold that little child in my arms over the font. I call them "little bundles of potential," for at that moment, no one but God alone, knows what they might become and what they might accomplish.

Joseph and Mary had a pretty good idea about their baby, Jesus. They were told at several occasions beginning with his conception. What a story that must have been – but on Christmas Eve we celebrate his coming, his Advent, a word that means *coming*.

And not simply the coming of Joseph and Mary's first child, but of God's Messiah, the Lord. As the one angel told the shepherds, the sky filled with angels and they sang of the birth of God's son! Well, you know the story.

That story is what this night is all about – the birth of a little baby, who would be the savior of the world. In a little while, we'll light little candles and turn out the lights and sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" and then we will go out into the cold winter darkness; "all is calm, all is bright."

Maybe tonight, or maybe tomorrow morning, we will exchange gifts with loved ones. We do this because we remember that God gave us the gift of his Son, and his Son gave us the gift of grace, and through the gift of grace we can have Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love.

It's easy, at this time of year to get sentimental about Christmas. At Christmas we can be like that baby about to be baptized – full of potential – anything is possible.

And then, as soon as Christmas is over, the wrapping paper and the tree get put out on the curb and the decorations and the little nativity scene that made all things seem possible for a while, get put back in the box until next year.

Where is it? Where is the Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love that Jesus was supposed to bring?" I am so glad you asked.

I'm going to presume for the moment that you all consider yourselves believers. If indeed God gave us the gift of his Son, and his Son gave us the gift of grace, and through the gift of grace we can have Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love, then we believers are obliged to claim it is our Christmas gift. And if we claim Peace,

Hope, Joy, and Love as our Christmas gift, then we believers are obliged to share it with others. Allow me to say more about this.

As I said, each week of Advent, we focused on one of those four Advent themes, and if we needed to, we brought it into the day's worship.

On the **first weekend of Advent**, Jesus gave a scary rapturous prophecy about his second coming (Matthew 24:36-44). Where is the *peace* in that?

We believers who follow the teachings of the LORD will have no problem staying on his lighted path that leads to the mountain, which is the LORD. (Isaiah 2:1-5) That path will lead to peace. If you don't have peace, you ought to do some soul-searching into what path you are following because peace comes from LORD.

If you are a believer, then you ought to have *peace*, and if you have peace you are obliged to share it with all who have no peace, but seek it. Peace is God's Christmas gift to share, not to keep.

On the **second weekend of Advent**, we were introduced to John the Baptizer whose mission it was to preach repentance as appropriate preparation for the coming of the LORD (Matthew 3:1-12). Where is the *hope* in that?

Isaiah foretold that when the LORD comes he will usher in a new age where our hope will be turned into a bizarre new reality. His imagery included the cohabitation of wolf and lamb; leopard and kid; calf and lion; cow and bear; even a child and a snake (Isaiah 11:1-10). If this sounds like a return to the Garden of Eden, it is.

In the age to come which Jesus Christ will bring when he returns, our hope will be made manifest – turned into a new age, a new reality.

If you are a believer, then you ought to have *hope*, and if you have hope you are obliged to share it with all who have no hope, but seek it. Hope is God's Christmas gift to share, not to keep.

On the **third week of Advent**, we found John the Baptizer rotting in prison wondering if Jesus is the one he and all Israel were waiting for or not. Where is the *joy* in that?

It is found in Jesus' answer. He said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them (Matthew 11:2-11). Isaiah said similar words when he prophesied that deserts will bloom, the weak will be made strong, the blind will see, and the lame will walk (Isaiah 35:1-10).

If you are a believer, then you ought to have *joy*, and if you have joy you are obliged to share it with all who have no joy, but seek it. Joy is God's Christmas gift to share, not to keep.

On the **fourth week of Advent**, we hear Matthew's version of the nativity that reveals the truth about the scandalous nature of the conception of God's Messiah, Jesus Christ. Disappointed Joseph tried to quietly dismiss his fiancé, Mary. Where is the *love* in that?

An angel of the LORD intervened and told Joseph that he and Mary were selected to have a special role in the salvation of humankind (Matthew 1:18-25). Imagining the character of the two, selected by God, I want to think that although God had derailed *their* plans, they were filled with *love* in knowing *God's* plan, and their role in it. God God's self was coming to dwell with them and all of creation. Through their child, Immanuel, God will be with us (Isaiah 7:10-16). The kingdom of God *has come near* in Jesus' birth.

If you are a believer, then you ought to have *love*, and if you have love you are obliged to share it with all who have no love, but seek it. Love is God's Christmas gift to share, not to keep.

Do you have Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love? If you do, then you have received God's Christmas gift to share, not to keep.

But alas, many do not. And sadly, many who consider themselves believers do not.

A member of the church gave me this article from the Wall Street Journal. It is entitled "Don't Believe in God? Lie to Your Children" and it is written by a Jewish psychoanalyst and therapist, by the name of Erica Komisar.

In this article, Erica addresses the question she is often asked, why is depression and anxiety so common among children and adolescents. She then takes off on a

diatribe against the irreligious culture in which we find ourselves and defends the many benefits of a life of faith lived out through the church.

Do you want Peace for you and your family? Komisar writes, "Religion or spiritual practices can teach children mindfulness, a sense of physical and emotional presence necessary for mental health. No matter how active my children were when they were young, they knew when they entered our temple for services they had to calm their bodies and relax their minds. Though they complained when they were kids, and still complain at times as adolescents, they have developed the ability to calm themselves when overwhelmed."

Do you want Hope for you and your family? Komisar writes, "Children or teens who reported attending a religious service at least once per week scored higher on psychological well-being measurements and had lower risks of mental illness. Weekly attendance was associated with higher rates of volunteering, a sense of mission, forgiveness, and lower probabilities of drug use and early sexual initiation."

Do you want Joy for you and your family? Komisar writes, "The idea that hundreds of people can gather together and sing joyful prayers as a collective is a buffer against the emptiness of modern culture. It's more necessary than ever in a world where teens can have hundreds of virtual friends and few real ones, where parents are often too distracted physically or emotionally to soothe their children's distress."

Religion or spiritual practices can teach children mindfulness, a sense of physical and emotional presence necessary for mental health."

Do you want Love for you and your family? Komisar writes, "It's rare to find a faith that doesn't encourage gratitude as an antidote to entitlement or empathy for anyone who needs nurturing. These are the building blocks of strong character. They are also protective against depression and anxiety."

In an individualistic, narcissistic and lonely society, religion provides children a rare opportunity for natural community."

End quote. If you want to read the whole article, I got permission from her to reprint it for you, and it is available at the Welcome Center.

So I don't know why you are here tonight. Maybe it is because you are a believer and you want to celebrate the birthday of the King of the Universe, or maybe it's because it is an old family tradition, either way, "You belong here. We belong together" this night of all nights.

But tonight I want to remind you of the gift of our loving God, the gift of his Son, and his Son gave us the gift of grace, and through the gift of grace we can have Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love.

If you have it, then you are to share it. If you don't have it, ask for it and I assure God will give you those good gifts. Merry Christmas, and may God's Christmas gifts of Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love be made manifest in your lives and in the lives of your families, now and forever.

Don't Believe in God? Lie to Your Children

The alternative is to tell them they're simply going to die and turn to dust.

By Erica Komisar

Dec. 5, 2019 7:20 pm ET

As a therapist, I'm often asked to explain why depression and anxiety are so common among children and adolescents. One of the most important explanations—and perhaps the most neglected—is declining interest in religion. This cultural shift already has proved disastrous for millions of vulnerable young people.

A 2018 study in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* examined how being raised in a family with religious or spiritual beliefs affects mental health. Harvard researchers had examined religious involvement within a longitudinal data set of approximately 5,000 people, with controls for socio-demographic characteristics and maternal health.

The result? Children or teens who reported attending a religious service at least once per week scored higher on psychological well-being measurements and had lower risks of mental illness. Weekly attendance was associated with higher rates of volunteering, a sense of mission, forgiveness, and lower probabilities of drug use and early sexual initiation. Pity then that the U.S. has seen a 20% decrease in attendance at formal religious services in the past 20 years, according to a Gallup [report](#) earlier this year. In 2018 the American Family Survey showed that nearly half of adults under 30 do not identify with any religion.

Nihilism is fertilizer for anxiety and depression, and being “realistic” is overrated. The belief in God—in a protective and guiding figure to rely on when times are tough—is one of the best kinds of support for kids in an increasingly pessimistic world. That's only one reason, from a purely mental-health perspective, to pass down a faith tradition.

I am often asked by parents, “How do I talk to my child about death if I don't believe in God or heaven?” My answer is always the same: “Lie.” The idea that you simply die and turn to dust may work for some adults, but it doesn't help children. Belief in heaven helps them grapple with this tremendous and incomprehensible loss. In an age of broken families, distracted parents, school violence and nightmarish global-warming predictions, imagination plays a big part in children's ability to cope.

I also am frequently asked about how parents can instill gratitude and empathy in their children. These virtues are inherent in most religions. The concept of *tikkun olam*, or healing the world, is one of the pillars of my Jewish faith. In accordance with this belief, we expect our children to perform community service in our synagogue and in the community at large. As they grow older, young Jews take independent responsibility for this sacred activity. One of my sons cooks for our temple's homeless shelter. The other volunteers at a prison, while my daughter helps out at an animal shelter.

Such values can be found among countless other religious groups. It's rare to find a faith that doesn't encourage gratitude as an antidote to entitlement or empathy for anyone who needs

nurturing. These are the building blocks of strong character. They are also protective against depression and anxiety.

In an individualistic, narcissistic and lonely society, religion provides children a rare opportunity for natural community. My rabbi always says that being Jewish is not only about ethnic identity and bagels and lox: It's about community. The idea that hundreds of people can gather together and sing joyful prayers as a collective is a buffer against the emptiness of modern culture. It's more necessary than ever in a world where teens can have hundreds of virtual friends and few real ones, where parents are often too distracted physically or emotionally to soothe their children's distress.

Religion or spiritual practices can teach children mindfulness, a sense of physical and emotional presence necessary for mental health. No matter how active my children were when they were young, they knew when they entered our temple for services they had to calm their bodies and relax their minds. Though they complained when they were kids, and still complain at times as adolescents, they have developed the ability to calm themselves when overwhelmed.

Today the U.S. is a competitive, scary and stressful place that idealizes perfectionism, materialism, selfishness and virtual rather than real human connection. Religion is the best bulwark against that kind of society. Spiritual belief and practice reinforce collective kindness, empathy, gratitude and real connection. Whether children choose to continue to practice as adults is something parents cannot control. But that spiritual or religious center will benefit them their entire lives.

Ms. Komisar is a psychoanalyst and author of "Being There: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters."