

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2021
Nativity of Our Lord /Year C
First Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7
Gospel Reading: Luke 2:1-20
Sermon Title: “Hope Has Come!”

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.

Texts - First Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

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.
³You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
⁴For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
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.

⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Gospel: Luke 2:1-20

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 one and all! I hope you get your heart's desire for Christmas.

You know that the four-week season of Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas. And Christmas is the celebration of Jesus Christ's birth – his birthday, in other words.

Sol Victus ~ Unconquered Sun
First celebrated December 25, 336 CE

You also probably know that Christmas, December 25th is not the actual date of Christ's birth, we have no way of knowing that. In 336 CE, Emperor Constantine adopted December 25th from the pagan holiday, *Sol Invictus* meaning *Unconquered Sun*, as the date of Christ's birth because it was the date that the days appeared to them to cease getting shorter and darker and began to get longer and brighter. Today we call that day the Winter Solstice, which is usually December 21st - so they were off a bit. I guess Constantine and his advisors felt that that event was an appropriate metaphor for the celebration of the birthday of the Christ, who we heard the prophet Isaiah describe as the light that broke into the deep darkness over the earth.

Well, that was fun for me. I hope you enjoyed it too. And I think the story is particularly appropriate for the days we live in. Some are afflicted with *Seasonally Affective Disorder*, a form of depression caused by a lack of sunlight. I am willing to bet that people with this affliction look forward to this time of year because they have the hope, and more than hope, the certainty that things will get better from here.

Generally speaking, our most faithful members are our elderly and that makes sense. They have lived long lives of faithfulness and they simply don't know any other way to be, but tragically, many of them have been forced to stay indoors and I am sure they are tired of it too.

Many of our children are not having the school experience we had. Many cannot participate in their studies and extra-curriculars that make that time of our lives so special.

Globally, it is estimated that 5.34 million people have died from the pandemic; 804,000 in the US alone. Now we are in another wave of the pandemic. We are a people living in ^{Isaiah 9:2}"a land of deep darkness."

Maybe we can relate to the ancient Israelites as they impatiently waited upon the LORD to make good on the LORD's promise to send them the ^{6b}*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*.

PAUSE

This Advent season the theme of our weekly worship has been "Hope for Those" and more specifically,

- Hope for Those who are Waiting
- Hope for Those who are Weary
- Hope for Those who are Watching
- Hope for Those who are Wounded

If you weren't worshipping with us at Zion each week then you missed a great series, not just because of my exciting and illuminating preaching, and my charming and winsome delivery, but because of God's inspiration and encouragement that came out of it.

You see it was because God's people were waiting, weary, watching, and wounded that God sent them a savior. And the reason God inspired Isaiah to prophesy that hope was coming was that God was giving the people an opportunity to get ready for his arrival. I'd like you to think of that time as First Advent. And I would like you to think of the season of Advent that we celebrate as Second Advent - our opportunity to get ready for his arrival.

Tonight is a celebration to be sure. Arguably, it is the biggest, most anticipated event on our calendars. And the reason that is right and proper is that we are celebrating the fact, the historical fact that God made good on that promise. God sent the baby Jesus to Mary and Joseph as the gift ^{Luke 2:10}"for all the people." "For all the people!" That is for the ancient Israelites who were first told of God's amazing plan to break into the darkness of a sin-sick world clear through history to this present day to you and me. Hope has come!

- Hope for Those who are Waiting
- Hope for Those who are Weary
- Hope for Those who are Watching
- Hope for Those who are Wounded

PAUSE

What is it that you hope for? We could ask the children gathered on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day what they hope for and they will likely rattle off a list of popular games and gadgets. As we mature, our hope matures - we want peace, health, happiness, the company of family and friends – is that too much to ask? From reading the headlines or watching the news we would have to acknowledge the answer is apparently *yes*. But that is not God's answer. Let's be honest, it's our sinful human answer.

Tonight, let us be reminded that "Hope has Come!" Two thousand years ago or so, God broke into the darkness of human life with a little defenseless peasant baby. The birth of this little baby caused the angels of heaven to sing, shepherds to leave their flocks, and wise men from around the world to bow their knees and pay him homage.

PAUSE

Yet, today, it seems we are waiting, weary, watching, and wounded – like we are without hope and in need of a savior. Makes you wonder if anything has changed, doesn't it.

Well, the prophet Isaiah wrote, ^{Isaiah 60:1}"Arise, shine; for your light *has* come, and the glory of the LORD *has* risen upon you." Worshipers of the holy baby born in Bethlehem, I have Good News! Hope has come!

The purpose of the season of Advent is not a four-week period to decorate and buy gifts for Christmas. The purpose of the season of Advent is to celebrate God's Christmas gift for all the people *by* decorating and sharing gifts for Christmas. I think it's a shame that our Christmas trees and decorations start to come down the day after Christmas. Aren't you aware that there is a twelve-day season to Christmas? I digress.

And Christmas is more than that – much more than that! After Jesus Christ grew up he used his own life to illustrate and teach faithful and godly living, and then when that wasn't enough to save us, he gave himself for the sins of the world. And while the world thought it was done with him, he rose from the grave, conquering death, and as he ascended he promised to return to make all things new!

He promised to return, and that is the purpose of Advent and Christmas. He promised to return and on this night, Christians all around the world demonstrate our hope that the LORD will make good on that promise - because the LORD's promise is hope for those who are waiting, weary, watching, and wounded! And because we have hope, we are inspired and encouraged *to make things better now as we wait* for his promised return.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Let our celebrations be demonstrations of our faith in him, the babe born in Bethlehem who caused the angels of heaven to sing, shepherds to leave their flocks, and wise men from around the world to bow their knees and pay him homage. Let us make him and his promised return our heart's desire for Christmas.

And the best way to celebrate is to be ready for his promised return by living our best lives now, demonstrating our devotion through godly and faithful living, and then, whenever he returns, we will be ready.

Prayer

Almighty God, you made this holy night shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence and in the last day wake to the brightness of his glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Merry Christmas everyone!