

Sermon TUMC – Advent IV – 2018

A Stable Place

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)
Micah 5:2-5a

Children's Time

String of Christmas lights from the back of the church

- This string of lights is the Christmas Story: the story of Jesus being born, is a very OLD story, it goes WAY back (start at the farthest light).
- Somebody first told it to their friends – maybe it was the shepherds -- who told it to their friends who told it to their family, who told it to their children and grandchildren, and then somebody decided to write it down in the Bible, and then who told it to their, children and grandchildren and then on and on and on until somebody told it to your Oma and Opa (Grandma and Grandpa) and they told it to your parents and they told it to you!
- And each time it gets told it's just a little different because people remember different parts.
- People write songs about it. Some of the songs we're singing are also REALLY OLD. From more than 500 years ago! And we still sing them.
- There is often a lot of light that goes with this story. In part because there's that part where there's a star that appears in the sky when Jesus is born. But it's also in part because we think of Jesus showing us how God is –things like God is love, God cares about us, that we are at our best when we love other people – seem like a kind of light when things are tough.
- So when you see the lights this Christmas, remember that with Jesus God sent us love, and God cares about us.

Meditation

When people are expecting babies, one of the things that takes up a lot of energy is “What shall we name the baby?” Do you remember those conversations? The angels saved Elizabeth and Mary and Zachariah and Joseph a lot of trouble by naming the baby. Because what we name things matters.

As I reflected on what to say to you this morning I was drawn to the carol O Come O Come Emmanuel. I learned that each verse of this hymn from the 15th century names Christ in a different way: Wisdom, Emmanuel, Dayspring from on high, Adonai, and so on. Each of those names for Christ carries a different expectation of what this Christ will bring.

The classic Handel piece, composed in the 1700’s, is an echo of earlier hopes in Isaiah 9: “For unto us a child is born.” It mentions different names for Christ: “His name shall be called: Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

So this is in a sense your task now at Christmas: to name what it is that you are expecting.

Christ is our hope for things to be different in this world. This is what we have waited for and what we wait for. The expectation that God will intervene is an expectation that constantly comes up and constantly renews itself – and often God does not respond in expected ways.

The prophet Micah, writing from within a state of siege, some 700 years before Jesus was born, kept the hope going for *his* people that God would send a new Shepherd and rescue those who were being afflicted; a Leader who would teach Peace.

Mary and Elizabeth in the first Century echoed the hopes for social upheaval which they had inherited from their ancestors in the faith: That God would set things right in their unjust world. This was *their* hope for Shalom.

Mary was pretty clear about what she and her people expected: a new world order. And this is in fact how Jesus himself inaugurated his ministry, quoting the prophet Isaiah he said: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

As one author noted: “[Jesus] must have learned a few things from his mother.”
(Karoline Lewis – Working Preacher podcast)

Many generations (centuries) later this is also the hope in which we again place our lives that as followers of this Jesus, whose coming we now celebrate. Things can be different, things will be different. We along with the prophets, with Elizabeth, with Mary are choosing to believe that the world can change. We are refusing to let circumstances have the last word.

It is a hope we practice each time we gather for worship, each time we seek to live with love and not hate, each time we remember that we are in God's hands. That we have been in God's hands, for many generations. *(Note about The Sunday Edition, Michael Enright, assessing how well Christians are doing at following our essential teachings.)*

Pastoral theologian Eugene Peterson, who passed away this year, spoke of following Jesus as "a long obedience in the same direction." In that sense, the Advent and Christmas season are a kind of reset button for us.

So I ask you: What is it we are hoping for?

Each hymn or poem or scripture reading we've touched upon this morning offers you some possibilities. What phrase or word drew your attention? *(Open to congregation)*

As we leave today I pray that you carry with you that one word or phrase or feeling that captures your imagination and ignites your hope.

Remember that today with Mary, Elizabeth and all the prophets we place ourselves in that long line of hope that Christ brings:

Hope that God imagines things we can't imagine,
Hope that God loves in ways that we cannot grasp,
Hope that God saves in ways we cannot fathom

My friends, light conquers darkness.
God is with us. Emmanuel is our stable place.