

Christmas Eve 2011

The prophet Isaiah, some 6 to 7 hundred years before the birth of Jesus, spoke of great hope for he and the people of Israel. It was in the midst of a hopeless time when foreigners occupied their land and enslaved them. "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." He foretold of a coming time of everlasting peace. He said that this peace had already come because God was with them.

Tonight as we sit here in this sanctuary in the quietness of the night, in many cases with family and friends, with the beauty of lighted candles and flowers and uplifting Christmas carols it sure seems to be a time of peace. The word sanctuary means a safe place, a shelter from the troubles and fears of life. And it is. I am grateful you have made your way here to join with one another in the quiet hope and calm of Christmas Eve, the good news of the birth of Jesus. No matter who we are or the circumstances we come from God provides what we need. God is with us and we are with each other.

We again hear this word of great hope. "For 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, and Prince of Peace." Now it had happened as the prophet foretold. We just heard it read from Luke's Gospel: "While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And 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."

So what is it we want this night, from this birth? What we discover is that the needs of those for whom Luke wrote down the story of Jesus' birth were little different from our own. The time was the latter part of the 1st century. It was a tumultuous time for Christians and Jews alike. There was open rebellion against Roman rule and this had brought on persecution and execution for all who didn't worship the Caesar of the day. The society was divided between haves and have not's, accepted and rejected. We know this because we read in Luke's Gospel of Jesus commending Samaritans, and indications that women have new places of importance among the followers of Jesus. Gentiles are welcomed into the flock. The poor and

disenfranchised are to be cared for. So it was that war, inequality, poverty and hunger, fear and sorrow, were reasons the Gospel writer was inspired to share the story of Jesus and his birth on paper. It was a dark and dangerous time and Jesus was with them because of it.

The story of Christmas, the birth of the Savior Jesus, is so important because it happens amidst these never ending events and challenges of the day. Busyness, routine, fear, unrest, dissension, war and division describe our time, any time. We are reminded of it in requests for to be included in Sunday prayers. These requests are concerns for people who are ill, primarily as result of cancer. Prayers are for persons serving in war zones and their families. We sometimes pray for families who are struggling for a variety of other reasons. Death and mourning result in prayer requests. We pray for safe travel and the well-being and success of students. For me it is the first of 71 Christmases without my mother. I hear a 911 operator telling of the cries for help primarily in the dark of night from hurting, alarmed, afraid, and threatened people. Darkness is the story bio-statistician tells about just having left a conference meeting with transplant physicians making medical decisions concerning an 8-year-old boy whose colon they had to remove. Each of us tonight brings with us the concerns and anxieties of our lives.

So it was that in a stable so ordinary, in an event unknown except to a few hired shepherds God came as Jesus amongst us. The angels by God's intention first announced this good news of the birth of Jesus to shepherds who were a lowly class of society. So it was that in a stable the Savior was born to save ALL people from the hopeless of the dark nesses of human life.

Over the years since that moment in Bethlehem, Christmas has become a festive time. But the importance and truth of the event is not in the holiday we have made of it. It is in the simple truth of God quietly slipping in amongst us to love us, and give us hope because God saved us from the darkness and human made light of life in Jesus.

You may be surprised by God's love for you. Your coming tonight is neither by habit nor as an escape from life but to receive the gift of renewed hope and purpose for life. The shepherds were changed in experiencing the Christ child. For "When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the

shepherds told them. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” We are changed as well. May this amazing star, the light named Jesus, continue to burn bright in your life and in your living! May Jesus be the light shining in your darkness!