

Christmas Eve - Year B - The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony - 12.24.20

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7, Titus 3:4-7, Luke 2:1-20

“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.” It cannot be denied that this year has been for most of us a year when we have experienced darkness in an unexpected way. I need not dwell on what that darkness has involved, we have each in our own way lived it. And so we come once again to Christmas Eve as we have come so many years in the past. We hear these familiar words from Isaiah, words that are heard each year as we gather to celebrate the birth of a child who was the expected Messiah and savior. When we gather to celebrate because the light has come into the world as promised.

If we look back over the history of the world since that birth in Bethlehem, we are aware that many generations of people have walked in darkness, personal and as nations. Our ancestors walked in the darkness of war, of depression and of hunger, of civil strife, and of personal loss. Darkness is a common human experience. It is out of the darkness that light can be seen. It is out of the darkness that we can move toward the light we see to acknowledge it, to embrace it and finally as people of faith to make that light ours.

This passage from Isaiah, read every Christmas throughout the world is a promise that darkness will not in the end win out. It is the tangible and visible sign that God is here, present with us in whatever darkness we find ourselves. And so, because light is real and more powerful than darkness, Isaiah could speak of a people coming out of the darkness and into the light. It is because light destroys darkness that we know that Isaiah spoke truth. It is because we have experienced the light that has brought us out of darkness in the past, that there is hope. We are the witnesses to the power of the light that is God in our lives.

And so this Christmas Eve, we gather, in spirit and virtually if not in person, to hear the story of the light of the Messiah coming into the world. It is such a familiar story, one we can tell by heart, and yet one we never tire of hearing because it is a story told especially for each of us. The Messiah, born in Bethlehem is born for each one of us, born to be the light, born to save us however that is needed in our lives.

I want to turn away for a time from the stable, the manger and Mary, Joseph and the baby, to a hillside in the Judean hill country near Bethlehem. This is the place where the announcement of the birth of the light, the long awaited and expected Messiah was first made known to the world. The shepherds we are told were living in the fields. It was dark, the kind of darkness that we seldom experience. There was no artificial light, only moon, stars and a small fire. And suddenly, out of nowhere there was the glory of the Lord which shone around them. Shone, light, suddenly they could see beyond the darkness and what they saw terrified them. Terrified them because this was something they had never experienced before, something far beyond their capabilities and expectations. An angel. Angels were creatures who were heralds, the ones who brought news of great and life changing importance. In the lived experience of the shepherds, news and change was rarely good. They were the lowest of the social classes, despised and often thieves because it was the only way they could survive. They could not participate in the religious culture because they could not observe the purity codes of frequent washing and of dietary restriction. They could not offer prayers and sacrifice in Jerusalem. They were outcasts with no hope of a better future. No wonder they were terrified, not only was an angel appearing to them, something that had never happened before, but they feared whatever news the angel brought could not be good.

The angel, with angelic disregard of the real feelings of the shepherds, told them “do not be afraid”. I can imagine that if the shepherds could have put together a coherent thought at the moment that thought might have been “easy for you to say.” We have all been in the position of the shepherds. Something happens that is new, unexpected and maybe even threatening and someone says to us “Don’t be afraid.” Ha, empty advice. The real task for the shepherds and for us is to be open to the moment, to see the possibility and to act in spite of the fear in the hope of coming out the other side into a new reality. It is the possibility of this new reality that is God’s gift.

Do not be afraid is not a command to banish fear, but to overcome it, to move out of the darkness that surrounds us into the light offered.

And so the shepherds listen to the angel and hear the good news, such good news that it is impossible to comprehend. A savior for them and for all people. When the angels depart the shepherds do not sink back into the darkness of the night, thinking perhaps they dreamed it all, that it could not possibly be real. No, they do the courageous thing, the thing we are all called to do when we hear the voice of God. They go and see “this thing that has taken place, which the Lord had made known to them.” And, when the shepherds came to the manger and saw the baby just as the angel had said, they believed that what they had experienced was real and was of God. And so they told first Mary and Joseph that this child was the light Isaiah spoke of, the light for all who were in darkness and had the courage to move out of the darkness to the light. This was the long awaited messiah, as unlikely a messiah as this baby seemed.

And, not satisfied with telling Mary and Joseph what the angel had said, the shepherds told anyone and everyone who would listen. Those who heard were amazed. Amazed, and beyond amazement, I suspect the shepherds met with some who believed, some who were skeptical, some who were hostile and some who in the moment seemed to see and then later fell away. The shepherds became the first evangelists and like all evangelists they were not always believed. What unlikely evangelists these were. Just like you and me, unlikely evangelists, but evangelists none the less. For God has entrusted the message of light for the world to us and those just like us. And so on this Christmas Eve, once again we hear the story of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed one coming into the world to bring the light to a people who have been in darkness. Yet the world will only hear this wonderful message if we who have heard and seen now go and tell.

Merry Christmas.