

Christmas Eve and Day 2013. Luke 2:1-20. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

We all know this story - whether you read Matthew last Sunday or Luke on this day you hear about a dangerous, socially unacceptable pregnancy, a startling decision by an older man to marry a young girl most would have had stoned, a messenger from God with good tidings, a challenging birth, and the homage of creation.

So I'm not going to repeat the story again. Instead I want to invite you into a reflection on meaning, and wonder what the consequences of grasping that meaning might be for you.

Many of you engaged the four week trek through the season of Advent that precedes this moment, others of you have trekked a different pathway to get here – perhaps not quite so sacred a journey, but still with one goal, one destination in mind: Christmas; this moment. Perhaps – if you took the latter way – you feel the need to reconnect – even if briefly – with “the reason for the season”. But however you got here, what ever pathway you took, you're here now; here in the warm embrace of the heart of Christmas!

How's that journey been? I'm struck every Christmas by the way we almost will a spirit of good cheer. We work sometimes diligently, sometimes casually, to make this time a special time when goodness and joy are front and center, hoping that nothing – such as, say, a family argument or a snippy remark, or an act of insensitivity – sullies that hope.

And then it'll be over. Over oh-so-quickly. Or will it?

Now that you're here in the heart of Christmas I want to tell you that, whatever you might think, this is not a destination celebration! Things don't end here, don't end with Christmas.

In this moment an invitation is being issued to you, whether you know it or not. In religious terms – and to take the birth language of the day – you are now, in this moment, being invited to conceive a future born from the promise of God. It's a promise that's centered on wholeness, on restoration, on reconciliation, on peace

As people of faith we hope for a world rooted in that promise. Yet we live in challenging times, when war seems everywhere, when the divide between rich and poor in our own nation seems to be getting bigger and bigger, when violence is everywhere, and where there's not much good will and peace to all, anywhere.

So it's an act of faith to nurture that hope in our hearts, to believe that - with God's help - we can somehow restore life, heal the sick, make peace, feed the hungry, and enkindle love.

There are times in every life when despair is strongly tempting. Yet, even to the last moments of his life, Jesus taught those around him to hope. Those who survived his loss were gifted with the Spirit of hope - a message of promise far larger than a single life or our life or one generation.

This is the hope of the person of faith, an eternal force, forever shining on fields of possibilities

to which we must make the journey in order to arrive.

There are moments when that hope is focused, and this is one of them, a fixed point but not an end point, a reminder to us that, like children, we must ask for and give voice to the dreams inside us - the gifts we seek in life and for the world. We must ask, and then when gifts are given to us we must use them. In using the gifts we have received, we are saying "Thank you!" to God with our whole lives, we are giving back from joy, we are living into our best selves, and we are making a transformative difference in the world. Ultimately, when we realize that we are made for love, hope is born for someone else in every moment we are moved by love.

Hope is born only from the experience of love. Hope is in us, because we are loved - by God, by family and friends, by animal companions, and by those who need us whom we do not yet know - and hope is ours to nurture in ourselves and in those around us. In every age, the world needs hope, and in every age hope is challenged. Look deeply into your heart this Advent - what are you waiting for and what are you prepared to do and to be in order to realize the new life that is being offered to you, even now?

None of this is about a terminal moment. What birth could be? This moment is about a new beginning, and while it is a moment of great hope, and joy and peace it is also a moment asking a question, and the question is directed at you; it's my Christmas gift to you, and I hope it won't be unwelcome! Here it is: if, in this moment, hope, or joy, or peace - or all three - are born in you, what are you going to do with that?