

Sermon: Luke 2:1-20, Isaiah 9:2-7 © Kate Heichler; Preached at Christ Church La Plata/Wayside
“Songs of Freedom” Christmas Eve, Year C; Sunday, December 24, 2024

Come Savior, Redeemer, Christ the Lord. Amen

What a great story! We love to tell and retell it, year after year.
We teach our children to love it as much as we do. What’s not to love?
Babies and cuddly animals, angels and sheep,
a few kings thrown in like a fairy tale. What a great story.
Does it change anything?

Someone recently asked me what I would say to someone leaving worship,
perhaps on Christmas Eve – perhaps it is you? – who says at the door,
“That was a lovely service. Love those Christmas carols. Good message.
Don’t think I buy it, though. It sure doesn’t look like anything is different
in this world – in fact ,things seem to be getting worse.”
What would you say? What would I say?

*“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.”*
That’s what I believe, that that’s what I have seen,
but I don’t think quoting scripture would get me very far.

I would say, “I know what it looks like when we look at the whole world.
Wars, corruption, nationalism, climate disasters, famines, fires, floods...
But God does not often seem to work in general – God works in the specific.
Even bringing his own son into this world had to be specific –
to a specific woman in a specific family in a specific stable in a specific town.
When we look at the level of specifics and relationships,
We see transformation. we see God at work.

Where have you seen darkness transformed by light?
A hopeless person starting to see a future?
A broken relationship healed by forgiveness and generosity?
A neighborhood transformed with homes and schools where people can thrive?
A nation taking care of its most vulnerable citizens?
That’s where we see God at work.
And wherever we see people being set free, there is God.
Because above all, I believe, God wants us free. From everything.

That's what those angels were singing about.

God's freedom sets us free from everything that binds us –

anxiety, anger, addiction, depression, poverty, disease, pain.

Yet usually we are set free through those things, not just from them.

God doesn't promise to alter our circumstances –

God promises to be with us in them and transform them through us.

You'd think Mary and Joseph would be set, right?

Chosen by God to be the vessels for the incarnation, the embodying of God's son?

But things were not easy for them as an oppressed couple in an occupied nation.

Things were not easy for them when that angel told them of God's plans,

Things were not easy for them the night Mary gave birth in a smelly stable.

"It was not a silent night," starts out one of my favorite Christmas songs.

And things did not get much easier after Jesus' birth.

On the first Sunday in January we will hear about some astronomers who came seeking a new king for the Jewish people they had seen foretold in their star maps.

Their calculations let them as far as Jerusalem, but not all the way to Bethlehem,

so they stopped to ask the King, whom they assumed knew all about this.

But all they did was alert him that he might have a rival around.

That unleashed a murderous plan putting two-year-old boys at risk,

So that angel spoke to Joseph again in a dream, and this time told him to take his wife and the baby and flee far from here.

They went from being homeless to being refugees.

Peace on earth, good will to humankind is God's promise and God's intention.

It is the plan God accomplished in Christ and is ever making known in our world until we see it completely here. God moved. God acted.

That is God's promise, a song of freedom.

We tell this story over and over because of the promise it contains,

a promise of purpose, and life; a promise made long before its events,

a promise encoded in the words of the prophet Isaiah,

words of promise we desperately need to proclaim into our world now.

In Christ that light has come irrevocably.

It is so bright, the very sky lit up. And it can never been put out.

It gets brighter the more we bring it to each other. So don't stop.

We are lights for the world, tonight and every night.

Amen.

"It is Not Over" from *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems:

"It's not over,
this birthing.
There are always newer skies
into which
God can throw stars.
When we begin to think
that we can predict the Advent of God,
that we can box the Christ in a stable in Bethlehem,
that's just the time
that God will be born
in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.
Those who wait for God
watch with their hearts and not their eyes,
listening
always listening
for angel words."

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 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.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And 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!"
¹⁵ When 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." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Isaiah 9:2-7

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.
 You 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.
 For 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.
 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood
 shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
 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, Prince of Peace.
 His 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.