

“LET LIGHT SHINE”

Psalm 96; John 1:1-5, 14; Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve 2023

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They aren't celebrating Christmas in Bethlehem this year. That news sort of broke my heart. It's not as terrible, of course, as the other things that are happening in that region and the world... but it seems so expressive of the depths of brokenness people are feeling. In the place where the story began, where since the 4th century the Church of the Nativity has marked the supposed site of Jesus' birth, home to generations of Christian families, and a holy place that has drawn millions of Christians through the centuries... the festivities have been cancelled this year. There are no singers, dancers, marching bands, or twinkling lights in Manger Square, none of the decorations and activities that are usually part of Christmastime in Bethlehem. Church and community leaders there decided that celebrating wasn't appropriate this year. The suffering that's resulting from the war in Gaza is on everyone's mind. There's also the fear of violence spreading into the West Bank, where Bethlehem is, and where life under occupation was already difficult. Then too, the war has kept the usual pilgrims and tourists away, and that's causing economic hardship. There will still be prayers, of course, and religious services marking the birth of Jesus. But instead of their usual beautiful nativity scene, a pastor at a Lutheran Church in Bethlehem placed the baby Jesus in a pile of rubble – a manger for a time of war. “Nobody is in a mood to celebrate,” he said.

We get it. Many of us have been there, maybe more than once, ... some of us are there right now, this Christmas. Whether it's personal tragedy or disappointment or struggles, or heartbreak and fear instilled by the unending suffering and hate in the world... sometimes the pain is so big that there's no room for anything else. Even when, even if, we don't feel that way ourselves, we all know somebody who does. So it's not hard to understand why there isn't much celebrating in Bethlehem this year.

Truth be told, there wasn't a lot of celebrating in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth, either. Mary and Joseph can't have been happy about a long and inconvenient journey, at the worst possible time, all because some distant ruler decided to take a census and collect more taxes from people in lands his armies had subdued. The heavy hand of the Roman occupation had already made life difficult, and this new order only added to the general sense of frustration and oppression. The chaos and the crowded conditions of Bethlehem likely didn't make anyone more cheerful, except maybe some merchants enjoying a bit of extra business. In that culture, which valued hospitality, people certainly would have helped Mary as much as possible, but times were hard, and resources stretched; and all in all, it wasn't a great situation in which to have a baby.

But that's sort of the point of the story, isn't it? That God comes to us in the most unlikely of circumstances, when things are bad, when even a little bit of celebration is

beyond us. Meeting us where we are. Just to be there with us in it. Sharing our vulnerability and our sorrow. Identifying with it, with us.

I looked at the picture of the baby Jesus in the pile of rubble in the corner of that Bethlehem church, lit by just a few candles, and I was really moved by it. "This is the meaning of Christmas," I thought.

But that's Christmas in Bethlehem. Here where we are, we can't miss seeing the complete opposite of that muted and sorrowful reflection on Christ's presence among the suffering. I notice it particularly in the displays of holiday decorations some families create in their yards. You know the displays I mean; every neighborhood seems to have one of them: there are lights all over the house, the trees, the bushes, the mailbox, everything; lighted reindeer and penguins and pretty much any other animals you can think of, angels and stars and snowflakes; Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus, with a few cartoon characters thrown in for good measure. Sometimes there's even music to accompany it. And often, in the middle of everything, a large, lit-up nativity scene, in which the baby Jesus rests serenely in a traditional manger, apparently not much bothered by the blinking and twinkling or the cars of people cruising past to enjoy the spectacle.

And you know what? I kind of resonate with this version of Christmas, too. I'm aware that plenty of Christian folks find this sort of thing both wasteful and a distraction from the true meaning of Christmas. And for other people, it's just way over the top. But there's something to be said for "over the top" at Christmas. Are we not celebrating the immeasurable love of God? the miracle of the creator of the universe entering time and space to share our human existence? the hope that shines like a light in the darkest night? the presence of God, Emmanuel, with us, still, here, now?

If you think of it that way, it seems understandable and entirely appropriate to throw restraint to the wind at Christmas - pull out all the stops, make feasts, play music, light up everything, do the things that make the children's eyes sparkle with delight.

If we turn once again to Luke's story, we see that there's joy there, too. Somebody provides shelter for Joseph and Mary. A child is born and tenderly cared for. Light shines in the dark. And if a "multitude" of angels singing "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" in the sky isn't a bit over the top, I don't know what is.

"Good news of great joy for all people" - *all* people! - is a wildly expansive promise. Yet the shepherds - people in the lowest, poorest strata of their society, unaccustomed to hearing good news - don't shut their ears to it. They might have responded with skepticism or cynicism, refused to let what they might have called a dream upend their routine. But they didn't. After the initial fear, their response is as open-hearted and spontaneous as can be - wonder, curiosity, amazement... then awe, joy, love, and finally eager sharing of the story that they have become forever a part of. Did they

bring gifts? Many retellings of the story suggest that they did, though Luke doesn't say. But it's not hard to imagine, is it? It's part of human nature to want to express joy in concrete ways – giving gifts of love, singing and dancing, sharing good food, gestures of kindness to strangers, lighting up the night, kneeling in worship.

And can we doubt that Jesus is there, in the carol-singing, in the laughter, in our beloved traditions, in the loving circle of family or friends, beside the excited children, amid the twinkling lights, at the table, here? Sharing our joy, our love, our hopes... as much as our vulnerability and fear and sadness.

That is Christmas... Jesus with us in the rubble of our lives, Jesus present in our moments of laughter and joy.

I know it might seem crazy to see Jesus in two such disparate ways of experiencing Christmas. But Jesus is God's embrace of our humanity, all of it, from the depths of unspeakable tragedy to the exuberance of joyful celebration... and everything in between, which is probably where most of us find ourselves: perhaps celebrating simply with quiet joy, sitting with bittersweet memories, grieving, slowly healing, in transition, feeling lonely or anxious, hoping for a better future, doing our best to love those around us, praying for peace, trying to trust God. Wherever we are, God meets us there.

Christmas shines the gentle light of God's love on us, and on our world. In that light, no pain is unseen, no joy unnoticed. In that light, maybe even our lives can reflect the same deep and wide compassion for all the sorrows and joys, the fears and hopes of our humanity – ours, one another's everyone's. In the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Amen.