

“REASONS FOR REJOICING”

Psalm 97, Isaiah 11:1-9, Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2017 ~ Christmas Eve

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

*This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.*

That poem by Madeleine L'Engle is one of my favorites. It speaks a certain truth about how we come – how we *must* come - to the manger.

This is not a night for reasoned defenses of the faith, for proofs and evidence, for systematic theology. I'm not saying there isn't a time for those things, only that this isn't it. This night is for faith from our hearts more than our heads, for kneeling in wonder and love, for theology experienced and lived.

Those who want to approach Christmas with historical evidence, attempts to debunk misconceptions about the story, arguments for believing in or not believing in the virgin birth, explanations for the star in Matthew's gospel, aren't necessarily wrong but they are missing the point. It's interesting and often illuminating to delve into the details of what it would have been like there in Bethlehem that night, for Mary and Joseph, for the shepherds. But none of that touches the heart and soul of Christmas.

Luke's gospel invites us into a sacred space. Into amazement. Into rejoicing. Into a *story* that shimmers with wonder and love and grace. It's a story that opens our hearts and speaks to us all, whoever we are and wherever we find ourselves on life's journey.

I hope you like the Nativity pictures from around the world. I think they are beautiful, and I love the way the different artists imagine the story set in their own places and cultures. You could argue that they are not historically accurate, but that would be missing the point. They are not after historical accuracy; these pictures are about a *heart understanding* of the story. They invite people to contemplate the story as good news *for them*. Taken together, they remind us that the good news is for all the people, for our whole world.

Well, we sure can use good news, can't we? We have heard a lot of bad news this year: hurricanes and fires, shootings and hate crimes, war and genocide, greed and poverty, racism and abuse. Some of us have dealt with personal bad news, too – deaths, illnesses, divorce, job loss. Sometimes it's hard to believe there can be good news – even at Christmas, even from angels.

Is there any reason for us to rejoice? Is it irrational – crazy, even – to think that this is more than a bit of celebrative hyperbole?

I say that it's not crazy, and not irrational exactly – but the reasons are not of the cold-hard-facts kind. This night, this irrational season, the ways of God's Spirit have a different kind of logic. The reasons for rejoicing have to do with hearing the story with our hearts, with the way it speaks to our spirits, with eternal truths and love made visible, with what happens when we find ourselves in the picture and kneel in the presence of holiness.

Here are some beyond-reason reasons to rejoice this night:

There is wonder, and we are still, in spite of our jadedness, in spite of all the bad news we have heard, capable of entering into the holy space of this night and feeling the presence of God. Rejoice!

Heaven and earth are not so far apart as we have imagined. The angels hovering over the flocks in the field are a clue, but the holy child, the baby who is God with us shatters the barrier we have perceived. God is with us. God's love is made visible, embodied in this baby. Rejoice!

God has come to us as a human baby: how could God tell or show us any more clearly that we are valued, in our human messiness and vulnerability and misdirected energy and limitations? We matter to the creator of the stars. Rejoice!

God comes to the unaware and unprepared and undeserving. God surprises us, sometimes with gifts we didn't know we needed. God works in ways we wouldn't think of, through people we wouldn't pick – maybe even people like us. Rejoice!

God identifies with the poor and the outcast. God chooses a home among the humble. This might not seem like good news to those who despise the vulnerable and refuse to see the marginalized, but it tells us that power and the trappings of success don't impress God. That's good news because such things are impermanent. It's good news because the truth is that before God we are all ultimately naked and defenseless and impoverished. It's reason for rejoicing because God's call for all of us to join in that solidarity moves us closer to one another and into a more compassionate and equitable vision for our world. Rejoice!

The Christmas story confirms what the prophet Isaiah tells us: equity, justice and compassion are still (and always) God's values, no matter what the media tells us to value, no matter what the preachers of a prosperity gospel claim, no matter what powerful people do. In the end, no matter how hopeless it may look to us some days, those are the things that remain. Rejoice!

Christmas eve is holy time. It always seems to me somehow set apart from other time. Things are different somehow. The world is different. Maybe we are different, defenses

down, hearts open, more vulnerable in the presence of a vulnerable baby. Love blooms bright and so wild that you never quite know what might happen.

But even better – and one more reason for rejoicing - the peace and promise, joy and love don't have to be just for this night, or this short twinkly season. We can make room for Jesus, for the wild and bright love of God that transcends all our rationality, in the rest of the year too. We can share God's solidarity with the poor and outcast, defy the tyranny of the Herods of the world, stand up for justice and equity, declare that God's love and our compassion are for all people.

We can put aside our demands and expectations, our need for control and explanations, our devotion to the bottom line and to our prejudices, our arrogant skepticism of things we don't understand.

We can listen for angels, kneel in wonder, tell the good news, believe in grace.

God's love blooms brightly and flourishes wildly in every season... and in us, whenever we make room. Rejoice!