

Come, walk in the way of God's heart

Sermon Title: *Good news of great joy for all the people*

Isaiah 9:2-7

² 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.

³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶ For a child is been born to us, an heir is given us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Protector, Champion of Peace. ⁷ 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 onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-14

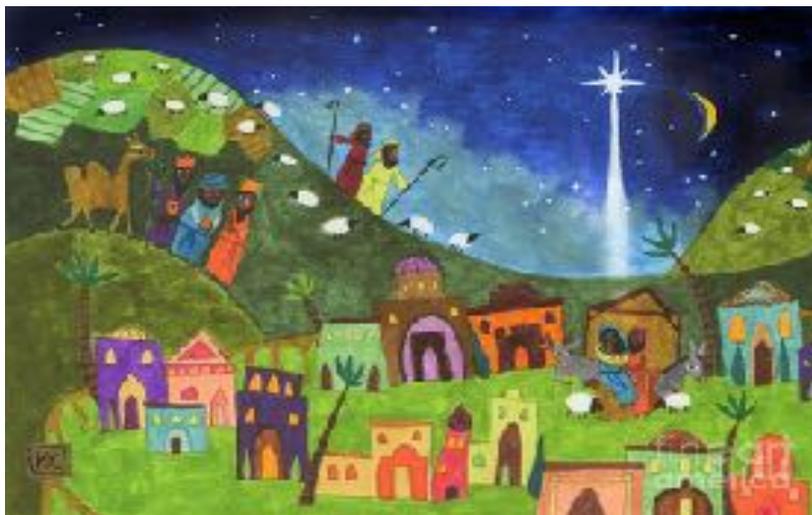
In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And 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!'



The wait is over. Today is the day. We know the carols, we know the readings, we know the whole story so well most of us could tell it by heart, at least the main pieces: the star, the shepherds, the angels, a young Mary, an older Joseph, a Bethlehem so full there are no hotel rooms, and perhaps even a donkey as transportation for Mary who in her eighth month of pregnancy must take a seventy-mile mountainous journey.



So we know the story of the child's birth, but what kind of child? Well, that is what the rest of the New Testament is about. Who was this Jesus? How did he live? What did he tell us about God; what did he show us about God? How did he show us the way of God?

That is for the rest of the year, but first, on this rare and snowy Christmas Day worship, let us stay here in the manger – let us stay here at the birth suite and behold the child.



So, I invite you to reach into the picture you have in your mind, a picture of a first century barn – likely a cave of sorts, dug out of the side of a hill. Go inside and take this new born baby into your arms. Pick up that baby who is just hours old, a bundle about as heavy as a bag of flour, his head red and a bit bruised from his entrance into the world.



Examine his tiny fingernails, count to ensure he has all his toes, scrape the fleck of sheep manure off his cheek, and say to yourself, “This is God in my arms.” Smell Mary’s milk on his breath, feel the damp warmth spreading through his swaddling clothes, and again, think to yourself, “This is God in my arms. This is what God decided to do, this is how God decided to act, how God decided to enter the world, how God decided to show us true and abiding love. For you. For me. For all of creation.



So we know the story. I would even go so far as to say that we perhaps take it for granted. We know it – but do we understand – who is this child?



In the first place, says Barbara Brown Taylor, a baby is – in the best of worlds – evidence that a love affair has taken place, and that is certainly the case with this particular child. God has loved humanity from the moment God thought us up, but the relationship has always been a rocky one. Taylor narrates it this way¹: In the beginning God figured paradise would be enough for us; God gave us everything we needed, all God thought we could want, and hoped for the best. But, it turns out that we wanted more than everything – we wanted to possess God too, we wanted to be like God, we wanted more and more...and wound up banished from the garden by two angels with flaming swords.

So all right, God said, you need something more structured – something less free-flowing. Let us make a covenant together, you and I. I will be your God and you will be my people. You be faithful to me and I will be faithful to you. But we were not faithful; we doubted God at every turn – we protested that we did not know what God wanted for us, and that faithfulness was too hard.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor narrates salvation history along these lines in her sermon, “God’s Daring Plan.”

All right, God said, you need some guidelines – something written down that you can refer back to as a reminder. Here are ten commandments – it would please me if you followed them. I will write them on big rocks so you don't lose them, and by the way, they are for your own good – if you follow them, things will go well for you. Ten is not too many, but not too few.

But we broke those as well, over and again. We wanted to worship other gods. We wanted to covet and we hated listening to our parents. Our memories of God's love and liberation were short and we longed to go back to an oppressive government because at least we could see them – at least we knew what they wanted from us: to make bricks and more bricks.

So God once again took another step in our direction. Let me simplify the covenant, God said. Love me and love your neighbor. From ten commandments to only two. Forget about the big rocks, that was too much – I will write this law/covenant on your hearts, that way it will always be with you – they are so obvious, you will feel them from within you, they will feel like they are what you were created to do.

But even that was too much, those two commandments were just too much. We loved ourselves, we feared our neighbors, we forgot about the One who Created us and put within us the breath of life.

The history of our love affair with God is the repeated story of our frailty and God's forgiveness; of our thinking that we do not need God, and then God welcoming us home when we realize our deep and desperate need for Her/Him.



Every time the distance between us and God has threatened to end the relationship, it is God who has stepped across the expanding divide, taking on more and more of the burden, until with the birth of a baby, God accepted it all.

Put the old covenant on hold, God says this day through the Christ child. I have a new kind of covenant in mind, harder for me but easy for you. From now on you do not have to come to where I am, however much I would like you to. I am so crazy in love with you that I will come all the way to where you are, down on earth, to be flesh of your flesh and bone of your bone. I will do it all, and all you have to do is believe me – believe that I love you the way you are, that I love you enough to become one of you – that I love my creation so much to come and walk with it; that I want to reconcile all things so much that I came to show you how to do it – that I came to show you how to be and how to love.



It is a scandalous move on God's part. Where is God's great majesty? Where is God's pride? Where is God's line in the sand? Love has removed those things.



This is the mystery we remember and worship this Christmas morning, the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of a God so in love with us that God became one of us – the story we know so well, and yet we neglect to understand its significance – I might even say that we sometimes take it for granted.

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.



On this Christmas morning, let us remember this great reversal, for this moment we imagine the powerful God of the Cosmos coming in the most vulnerable form – we look into that manger and pick-up the child, and we imagine for a moment, not us being in God’s arms, but God in our arms – a baby just hours old.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.



Sending Blessing

And now as you go from this place, may the God of scandalous love go with you –

*renewing you of the miracle of this day;
allowing the joy of God's impossible love sink deep into your soul –
that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.*

Go in peace.

Amen.