

The Season of Advent with its longing and hope have finally brought us to this place—the highest and most blessed service of the Christian year. And so tonight is finally a time to catch our collective breath and take in the beauty and nostalgia of this Christmas night. The hymn ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ declares, ***“The morning stars together proclaim the holy birth and praises sing to God our king and peace to men on earth.”*** So it seems as if we are joining with the angels tonight as we celebrate the holy birth of our Savior. It is as if for a moment heaven and earth are joined in this golden hour as we celebrate and rehearse the wonder of the ancient story. A story that contains ***“...good news of great joy that shall be to all the people.”*** It is a story that highlights God’s amazing love manifested through a child who was born, and his name was called ***“Emmanuel, meaning God with us.”*** It is this God who is with us, comes to give hope to those living in bleak circumstances.

The Rev. Martin Niemoller, a prominent German pastor, who spent nearly eight years in a Nazi concentration camps because he openly opposed Hitler, spoke these words of hope to his fellow prisoners in Dachau on Christmas Eve in 1944: ***“My dear friends, on this Christmas . . . let us seek, in the Babe of Bethlehem, the One who came to us in order to bear with us everything that weighs heavily upon us.”*** Niemoller went on to explain that ***“God Himself has built a bridge from Himself to us, ... A dawn from on high has visited us!”*** His words of hope were inspired by the imagery and magnificence of an eastern sunrise that breaks through the night-time darkness.

It is no wonder that Edmund H. Sears wrote in his carol ‘It Came Upon A Midnight Clear’ that tonight is a time to ***“... rest beside the weary road, And hear the angels sing”*** (verse 3).

So let’s review the Christmas story once again. Our Testament lessons from Isaiah relates, ***“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”*** (Is. 9:2). And so the first people who heard the good news were “shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” There were people who were not used to getting good news, they were ordinary sheep-herders. You might call them the overlooked, taken for granted, hard-working, country folk of that era. Which reminds us that no matter who you are or what you have or have not accomplished – his grace is greater still.

So here is the first piece of good news, from the story of good news. That God has and does break into our normalcy and brings us a message that fills us with hope, not just to the people who were accustomed to getting good news, but especially for those who weren't.

So whether you are ***“beneath life's crushing load,”*** or ***“...toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow”*** as the great hymn writer Henry H. Sears penned in the carol, ‘It Came Upon the Midnight Clear’; God’s good news is for you. For the meaning of Christmas is more than you may have imagined with a silent night and a gentle mother surrounded by soft and sweet smelling hay. It is even more than just a tiny baby with wispy hair and a warm glow around His head. For while some of that imagery may be true, in the big picture of things he came into a messy world to offer hope that our own story (whether it is broken, or plain, or feeling discounted or overlooked) can be made more truly alive and full with God’s holy and eternal light.

I heard a story this past week that illustrates this principle, as I was visiting with Vic Rinaldi the founder of one of the mission groups that we support. The mission’s name is KARIS (the Greek word for grace) and the group brings kindness and relief to those in need. Vic described how many years ago he was intrigued by the unique joy that had come to a relative of his who had recently accepted Christ into his life. And so he timidly asked him, “So if I might be interested in this Jesus of yours, (and I am not saying that I am) what would I have to do? The Christian brother who he was speaking to was thought-provoking and yet profoundly simple in his answer when he responded, “Just ask him.”

Could it be that simple? The Bethlehem Carol proclaims, *“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given, so God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of his heaven...”* And so the Apostle John writes, ***“to all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”***

This is the wonder of Christmas. ***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”*** (Luke 2:11). *“No ear may hear his coming, but in the world of sin. Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”* Amen.