

They Shall Live Secure

Christmas Eve 2009 Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

Text: Micah 5:2-5

*O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

The vision of peace described in the beloved carol is focused on this holy night. Our hopes are ignited and our fears allayed in the birth of this baby, gift of God and blessing from heaven. Do you know the story of the carol? On Christmas Eve in 1865, a young Episcopal priest named Phillips Brooks approached Bethlehem on horseback and then worshiped in its ancient Basilica of the Nativity. The experience left a deep impression on him. Three years later, the children of his parish in Philadelphia asked him to write a new Christmas song. The memory of Christmas Eve in Bethlehem flooded over him-- he wrote the words in a single evening. And on Christmas morning in 1868 the children's choir of Holy Trinity Church first sang it [*retold by Nancy Taylor, Feasting on the Word, p. 78*].

I was not able to visit Bethlehem on my journey to the Middle East a couple of years ago—travel across Israeli check-points into the Palestinian-controlled region was deemed too dangerous, and our group was advised to avoid the volatile situation. The beauty of the still, sleeping city is marred by long-standing violence and warfare. And perhaps you wonder, as I do, about the promises we proclaim this night of "peace on earth, good will to all." Where are they fulfilled in this crazy, hurting, and radically insecure world we call home?

Yet it is Bethlehem that the Old Testament identifies as the city from which shall come the Prince of Peace. The prophet Micah foretold peace in a time when the nation was in trouble---threatened by invasion from outside forces as well as by internal corruption and economic loss. Out of deep anxiety that strikes an all-too-familiar chord, the prophet delivers God's message of hope. Listen for God's Word:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall

return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

The Word of the Lord....thanks be to God!

Looking for a moment of peace in a busy holiday season, I attended a local church's *Messiah* sing-along. It's a treat I give myself every year. There over the noon hour, a small chamber orchestra and guest soloists present the familiar, glorious Advent portions of Handel's oratorio. And the audience gets to sing the choruses---For Unto Us a Child Is Born, And the Glory of the Lord, building to an over-the-top rendition of the Hallelujah Chorus. The warmth of the cathedral sanctuary was a welcome respite from the winter wind. Light pierced through the stained glass windows producing an ethereal glow. Instrumentalists were tuning, and the air was crackling with anticipation from the capacity crowd, as I took a seat among the altos. The orchestra began the overture. And then it started. A baby's cry. Not a gurgle; not a coo; an all-out angry caterwaul, joined quickly by a second, louder voice: a duet of screaming siblings. The family was out of my sight-line, but not out of earshot, and the restless outbursts continued throughout the entire presentation. But that's not all. During the tenor solo, some guy a few rows back started calling out "Bravo, bravo!" Immediately I feared the worst: a patron with a little too much holiday cheer. The woman seated next to me seemed utterly oblivious to the disruption---repeated before, during, and after each section, and when I inquired during a break, she replied nonchalantly, "Oh that's one of the guests from the group home. He just *loves* the *Messiah*." Well, now I was getting frantic; this wasn't the lovely, perfect scenario I had counted on as an oasis of peace amid the frenzy of the season. It was hot in the crowded sanctuary and it was noisy and then it was over. As I gathered my things to leave, I noticed the woman who had been next to me had tears streaming down her cheeks. She quickly wiped her eyes, and said "I'm sorry. The music....it's so beautiful. My mother died this year and she was a great musician. I didn't inherit her ability, but I thought this might be a good way to be close to her at Christmas."

And then, finally, it hit me: this is the world Jesus entered. Not a perfect world. Instead, a world where good intentions get hijacked and babies make urgent demands and people die. A noisy world. A broken world. But that imperfect stuff provides the raw material for God's redemptive purposes. Just backwater Bethlehem---one of the least important cities of Judah. . . . a pregnant, teen-aged woman giving birth in a barn. The peace Jesus came to bring us doesn't remove us from the commotion of life; it doesn't insulate us from the cries and tears and interruptions of the people with whom we share

this place, or our own. Instead, it immerses us in all of that. By bringing us close to the bone, to real life scraped clean of protective cover, Christ hallows these experiences and makes them part of our healing. God offers a security the world cannot give and is hard even to imagine. The blind shall see; the lame shall walk; the lion and the lamb shall lie down together; the poor will rejoice, the speechless will sing out, and the dead shall be raised. I think the guy yelling “Bravo” understood something that almost escaped me. For with just these unpromising elements the Ruler of the Universe labors to make good on every last one of these promises.

God’s ways are not our ways. The Prince of Peace didn’t fit anyone’s expectations. The striking image in this text is a shepherd who will protect and provide for the flock. A leader whose strength is found in the power of love, not the love of power. A leader who reconciles all that has been ripped apart, who reaches out to people lost and divided, and welcomes them home. This is the One who is bread for our deepest hunger and peace for the fears we most try to deny. This is the One who shines an everlasting light into our dark streets. In this vulnerable baby of Bethlehem we will find the security for which we long.

But how does this happen? Will the light we ignite with these candles illumine anything beyond this safe and sacred sanctuary? What can we take from the quiet beauty of this night that will make a difference in the complex, uncertain, volatile and insecure world we inhabit the rest of the year?

Best-selling author Anne Lamott tells of taking her two-year-old son on a working vacation to Lake Tahoe. One afternoon she put him down for a nap in the bedroom and went to the living room to do some work. Some minutes later she heard him knocking on the door from inside the room, and figured he had crawled out of his play pen. She got up to put him down again, but when she got to the door, she found he’d leaned on it and locked it. So he was calling to her, “Mommy, Mommy!” and she was saying to him, “Jiggle the doorknob, honey!” But then he realized that his mother couldn’t open the door, and panic set in. He began sobbing. Lamott tells of crazily trying to get that door open---calling the rental agency, pushing hard, jimmying it open with a credit card, all the while calling out “I’m here! I’m here!”--- but nothing worked. There he was, her beloved and terrified little child, locked in the darkness. Finally she got the idea to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there was about a one-inch space. She kept telling him over and over to bend down and find her fingers. Somehow, after a while he did. They stayed like that for a long time, on the floor, clasping each other’s fingers in the dark. Slowly, he calmed down, feeling her love, feeling connected and cared-for, until

at last his weight resting against the door caused it to pop open and free him into her arms. [*Anne Lamott "Operating Instructions," pp. 219-221*]

Friends, in Jesus, God has offered us a hand squeezed under a locked door. Emmanuel—God is with us. That glorious reality makes this silent, holy night only a resting place on a journey of a lifetime. In candlelight we see what is true all the time. Life is imperfect, even precarious. We are little children in the dark, anxious and uncertain. But tonight we touch again the extended fingers of the One who has come into this world and loved it and changed it. That touch does not resolve every mystery, answer all our questions, or smooth out every rough place. But it is enough to show us we are not alone. It is enough to remind us that our hands extended toward others can become-- by God's grace-- the source of their hope and freedom. And ours.

*O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us*

. . . .and we *shall* live secure. Bravo, God! Bravo, bravo!