

“Hope Restored”

Christmas Eve Sermon, 2013

THE SHEPHERD’S HOPE

When the shepherds saw the angels their hopes began to be rekindled, reawakened.

Shepherds were poor of the poor—paid minimum wage or worse.

Did not own land or sheep—they were sharecroppers.

Tending sheep was a traditional livelihood for Israelites—King David was raised in a shepherd family, for example—but it was no longer what it once was. It was an occupation that had lost its simple dignity. It was a dead end without hope of earning the means to raise a family. Shepherds were often considered rough characters because they were so poor, at times perhaps they were driven by hunger to steal. It says the shepherds in this story were “living in the fields”, perhaps they were homeless.

It was no accident that the angels announced the good news of Jesus’ birth to these poor shepherds. The angels came to show them a sign that would restore their hopes.

In the time of Jesus the Roman Empire was occupying the land of Israel, taxes were at extortionary rates, and while a small class of elite Israelites were enriching themselves in collusion with their Roman occupiers the vast majority of the people were struggling with poverty. They lived with a gnawing sense of being dispossessed and disinherited.

Luke tells us that the Emperor Augustus had called for all the world to be registered. This was another act of oppression, because the registration would be used to increase the tax quotas and further exploit the subjects of the Roman Empire. When the angels announce the good news they say that “a Savior, who is the Messiah” has been born—they do not just say “the Messiah has been born” because the term “Savior” was used as propaganda for the Roman Emperor...and yet he was not a Savior for the people of Israel or any of the people in the other occupied territories. The emperor was called “savior”, their oppressor, so the angels proclaim Christ “Savior” because he will be the liberator of the people. They are rectifying terms. They are overcoming falsehood with truth.

So the shepherds went to see the baby Jesus, and when they saw him their hopes were restored.

They found in him the hope expressed by the prophet Isaiah, when he prophesied that a child named Immanuel would be born who would rule Israel with justice, and bring in an age of peace, equality, and holiness.

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

In the newborn baby Jesus the shepherds find their hope for a fairer world, where they will be paid a living wage for their labor. Where they will work on land they own instead of having to live as sharecroppers. Where God's reign of justice and peace will displace the tyranny of Caesar and the Roman Empire.

Jesus' whole ministry was charged with this hope for justice, which he spoke of as the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. It is a hope that is especially present to those on the bottom of the barrel, who know first-hand the despair of poverty, of violence, of a government that terrorizes the people in order to maintain the status quo of inequality. This is a hope that the world still needs. It is a basic hope for peace in the midst of violence, benevolent government in place of exploitative government, and economic equality in place of a world where the poor are left to starve. This is the hope of the Kingdom of God. Jesus said that it is easier for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to enter the eye of a needle.

I've begun with a consideration of the political and economic dimensions of this hope that Jesus's birth signified, and that he restored, for the people of Israel. It is a hope that is relevant to us today, as Americans, and as global citizens, in more ways than I can name.

In the struggle for a fair minimum wage. In the efforts to curb gun violence in our suburbs and cities. In the movement to heal the earth by limiting pollution and dealing with over-consumption. In the continuing struggle for racial equality in our nation and globally. In so many war torn places, and in our own nation, where weapons of mass destruction are stockpiled. In all these areas and more Jesus is a sign of hope of what peace could look like and will look like when the Kingdom of God comes on earth.

I want to end by considering the spiritual dimensions of this hope that we find in the baby Jesus. I want to look at the soul-meaning of the story of Jesus' birth, for every part of the sacred scripture speaks not only of the reality of the outer world, but also of the soul and its inner workings.

The birth of Jesus, who is God's word and spirit incarnate, divinity dwelling fully in a human being, is a sign for all of us. It is a sign about the nature not only of Jesus, but rather of all humanity, for Jesus and Mary represent all humanity just as Adam and Eve do. In the story of Jesus' birth we find a confirmation of that divine spark within which makes us all children of God. When we look at Jesus our hopes are renewed from the inside out because we see the divinity of our own souls, our inner purity and human goodness that is indestructible because it is given by God as a part of who we are.

There is a part of each of us that corresponds with this holy incarnation of God's word in Jesus.

When we look upon the baby Jesus with the eyes of faith we experience a reawakening of that sacred part of ourselves at the core of our being. Inasmuch as our lives have taken us away from our center, inasmuch as our self-seeking and fear have alienated us from our true identity, yet as we behold the Christ child lovingly cradled by his Mother we are reminded in a very deep way of the sacredness of our own natures, which the scripture says are made in the image and likeness of God. For our essential being is spiritual, it is not of this world but of God; we are human beings, but more, we are children of God.

Because this divine spark is in us, because we are children of God, we have reason to hope that the Kingdom of God that is within us will one day be manifested on this earth as it is in heaven.

It is as Children of God that we hope for peace and justice, for healed relationships, for inner peace, and wisdom and spiritual growth. For with God all things are possible.