

Sermon for Christmas Day 2016 – “Comfort and Joy”

Nativity of Our Lord, Year A – Text: Luke 2:1-20

It’s Christmas Day, and I want to ask a simple question. How many times have we heard the Luke’s Nativity story? Or the version from Matthew’s Gospel? How many times have we heard the story about the simple shepherds in the field watching over their flocks at night? How many times have we heard that suddenly in a starlit sky there comes the angel and the heavenly host proclaiming peace on earth, good will to humanity? How many times have we heard that the shepherds go and find Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus lying in the straw surrounded by the silent, innocent benediction of the animals in the stable? How many times have we heard that wonderful story? How many times have we seen it on greeting cards, in movies, or on TV? How many times have we seen this wonderful, warm, loving image?

Isn’t it a lot like the swaddling clothes, the bands of cloth that Jesus is described as being wrapped in? Christmas is like that for us isn’t it? It’s like streamers of warm and wonderful experiences, memories that we treasure and hold dear that we wrap around ourselves every Christmas. It keeps us warm in the winter. It shelters us from the cold. It makes us feel comforted and hopeful. It brings us back to childhood, every Christmas, year in, year out. And you know, the truth is that even the most forward-thinking or progressive among us, become, every Christmas, traditionalists.

Now, if you’re like me, you’re an absolute sentimentalist whenever it comes to Christmas. You don’t want it to ever change. You don’t want to ever stop hearing this story in Luke. You never want to stop seeing that image of the baby Jesus in the manger. You want to feel that again and again and again. You get nostalgic about it. Christmas memories are comforting to us. We never, **ever**, want Christmas to change. And, then, somewhere in the distance, we hear a small sound, the sound of a tinkling bell. No, it’s not the Salvation Army kettle bell. It’s what one theologian calls the bell of irony, the irony of our faith. And the irony is, that on the very feast of the nativity of Jesus, when we so much want nothing to **ever** change, we are in fact celebrating the greatest moment of change in all of human history. At least as great as the moment of Creation itself. Think about that. Christmas, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, is all about change. It’s all about God once more breaking into history, shaking things up, doing something extraordinary.

It’s all about God coming to us, challenging us to confront change head-on and to be active in being a part of what God is doing, being partners with God in the renewal of all creation around us. People, places, **all** creation. Christmas, year after year, is the celebration of the fact that **no year** is ever the same. It’s the celebration that our **lives** are never the same. That **nothing** has been the same since that first Christmas. The day when God entered into history and changed **everything**. It’s the celebration of the fact that every year we are a little bit older and (hopefully) wiser but still engaged with our God, the God of history, in making things happen.

But, as I said earlier, there’s really no escaping the irony that on a day when we want absolutely nothing to change in a place where change is often resisted, that is, church, we are in fact celebrating the greatest change to ever occur. I know, believe me I know, lots of folks don’t like change. Especially Christians. I get that, I really do. But, I don’t think change is something that we should fear. Change is the nature of life. And, loathe as we sometimes are to acknowledge it, it’s the nature of the church.

We mustn't take our sentimentality for a Christmas season and extend it over the other 364 days of the year. We mustn't build walls to try to hold back God. A God who may've rested on the seventh day but was **far** from done creating. We shouldn't be afraid when what we do in church and what the church does in the world around it suddenly seems to be different. I know that just the word change makes folks nervous. Truth be told, it makes *me* nervous. I happen to think that tradition is a wonderful thing...honest. That it's something to be respected and honored. I realize that sometimes church is the only constant, the only meaningful, sane thing in a world that at times appears to have gone completely insane.

So, what do we do? Well, for me, it's a question of balance. We must honor those people and things that have gone before us. We must respect the traditions that have left us this rich, spiritual legacy. At the same time, we must not fear the new. And I'm hoping that we might even get a little excited by the possibilities that exist, by the wonderful things that **can** and **will** happen with God. The God that did such a wonderful thing that first Christmas and with whom all things are possible. The angel that announced the Good News to the shepherds told them to fear not. A child has been born for us, a son given to us. In that child, God is indeed with us. And through that child, God is making all things new. The reminders are all around us here today. So, let us celebrate the gift of the newness of life He bought for us at such a high price. Let us be reminded that His birth in that stable on that first Christmas, so long ago, was only the beginning. There was more, so much more, to come. The story would continue. And we ourselves, *our* lives, *our* stories, would eventually become part of God's great, unfolding story. We would continue the work that the tiny baby, now asleep in the manger, would one day undertake. And that those who came before us here at Westwood First would themselves carry on. We mustn't forget them or the challenges they faced in changing times. It's all a large part of who and what we are and what we will become. But neither can we forget that there's work to be done, as we await Christ's return.

But today, I suggest we bask in the glow of the candlelight and the warmth of those friends and family around us. I suggest that we wrap ourselves up in Christmas. I suggest that we once again enjoy the visions of angels and shepherds, of the manger and the baby in the straw and the animals. Of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, and keep it exactly the way it's always been. For the rest of today, let it be comforting, familiar and traditional. Let it be safe and warm and loving. There'll be time enough next week for us to step back out into the world and its harsh realities. Back into our own incarnation. Soon enough, it'll be time to pick up our tools, put our shoulders once more to the wheel, our noses to the grindstone, and go back to work with God to **face** change and help **bring** about change for the glory of His name.

It's difficult to live in the time between the resurrection and the second coming of our Lord Jesus. We've been waiting almost 2,000 years, you'd think we'd be used to it by now. But with all the constant, chaotic change that confronts us at an ever-maddening pace in the world, is there any wonder that there's a tension and anxiety, even fear? Unfortunately, no, which is understandable. But, and here's the thing, there's hope. There's indeed hope, because as the hymn reminds us the "hopes and fears of all the years" were indeed met in that little town of Bethlehem so long ago. And if nothing else, the Christmas story is a reminder that God keeps his promises. It's a reminder that we're not alone. A reminder that our God is both *with* us and *for* us, and always will be.

And so, for today, for this one special day, let's relax in the peace that's holy. Let it renew and refresh us. Let's stay awhile in a time where time itself seems to stand still. Let's rest in a place where the winds and tides of change are held back, held back by the sounds of angelic voices drifting through a cold, bleak and otherwise silent landscape...

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen and amen.