

Christmas People
Sermon on Christmas Eve 2017
Isaiah 9: 2-7

Sisters and brothers,
Let us meet some Christmas people tonight.
And let us become Christmas people.
Let us discover the Christmas dream of all humankind...

Let me invite you to meet Mary and Joseph as they go to Bethlehem – and end up having their first baby there.

Joseph, because he was an “offspring of the house of David” had to show up personally in the village of his ancestors.

He took Mary with him. The baby Mary was expecting was due any time.

The journey to Bethlehem was a journey full of hazards: street robbers, dusty and dirty roads and steep mountains... all challenges to everybody – and how much more to Mary in the final stages of her pregnancy.

In Bethlehem Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, and like any other Palestinian mother, she wrapped him in bands of cloth. Then she placed him in a manger.

And that manger is a sign of the mess and the muddle into which God came.

Let me invite you to meet the shepherds and the angels.

God’s messengers out there in the fields of Bethlehem meeting some of the outcast of their day and filling their lives with the good news that there is nobody outside the reach of the love of God.

The shepherds were living in the fields and keeping watch over the sheep.

In first century Palestine shepherds had a reputation for being downright irreligious.

They were so far out of the normal society that they were called “people of dirt”.

And no halfway sensible and respectable Jewish parents would have wanted their daughter to marry a shepherd.

Shepherds just couldn’t be trusted.

And yet, it was to shepherds that God sent the angels’ choir.

It was to shepherds that God made known that a saviour was born.

It was the shepherds and not the wise men, who were the first to receive the news!

Let me invite you to see the shepherds and other folk visit the newborn baby in the stable.

See them all standing there, some in disbelief, others in awe and in wonder.

Listen again to the words of the angel ...spoken to the underdogs and the outcast: I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day... a saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

It obviously doesn't matter who we are or what we have done.
God speaks to us, God comes to us, God accepts us.
We don't have to reach a certain standard of holiness before God loves us.
He loves us as we are.
We don't have to prove ourselves.
We don't have to become somebody else or something better.
And to prove this, God sent the message of his son's birth to a bunch of freewheeling shepherds spending the night in the fields, taking care of their sheep. Nobody had ever brought them good news before.
And suddenly they discovered that they were on God's guest list.

Let us meet all those people as they understand once and for all that God relinquishes power, and is found in the fragile and vulnerable body of a baby...
Let us meet them, and share with them the dreams and the visions which had kept them going over generations.

Whether they could read or not, whether they were educated or illiterate, whether they were rich or poor they all had heard the poetry of old:
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...

They'd learned who this prophet was who had spoken such powerful words and given them to the people then and now:
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
They'd believed in the promises and had hoped that one day they would come true:
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

And that night out there in Bethlehem they'd understood that from now on things would be different because they'd met God himself:
He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

When Isaiah spoke his famous words, there was much darkness.
Former prophecies of gloom and doom had been fulfilled.
But Isaiah was above all a prophet of hope,
and so his text is offered to us every Christmas as a text to give **us** hope.

Light will come into the darkness, Isaiah told the people.
It was so real and vivid in his mind that he felt the positive future had already begun, the saviour who they all were waiting for had already come.

Still his life and that of the people around him was marked by much pain and suffering, filled with disappointment and frustration, with despair and hopelessness. He attempted to encourage the people by talking of a nation being multiplied. Maybe not an easy picture for us, but for a nation that had been depopulated through war it would indeed be a joy if the birth rate increased. He talked about the "joy of harvest" – also not easy for us: our food supply is independent of the seasons. But in Isaiah's time, as still for many people in the world today, harvest signified the end of a long period of hunger.

We are dealing with images of the past, sure.
But we do understand the message of great joy –
no matter whether told then or now.
In the Christmas story the joy is evident.
...see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...

With a faith that carried Isaiah through, his sorrow was turned into joy.
And what was true then must be true today!
Whatever burden or mess we have in our past,
the promise is that by living a life of hope,
we will be able to deal with it.

Isaiah talked of freedom and victory, of peace and disarmament,
of a new kingdom...
It would have no end...
A new king would arise.
He would create good times for all people.
He would be extraordinary and special and help the people to live together in peace.
God would live with his people,

he would walk with them,
protect and direct them,
build them up
and make them strong...
This is what we celebrate each and every year at Christmas.

Isaiah's dream of a day when war and pain and darkness will be no more feeds and fills us at Christmas.

We too, dream of peace,
we dream of healing,
we dream of light and warmth and friendship.
We want this feast to be a special time for us
because deep inside we all have this longing for a time and place
where all things are made new...

Isaiah spoke his words of hope the people who live in darkness...
Simple folk like the shepherds,
men and women, and children knew the prophet's dream and dreamed it, too.

Tonight Isaiah speaks to us.

We can make his words our Christmas vision and dream it, too.
Dream against all the odds in our lives,
dream against violence and wars,
dream against accidents and catastrophes,
dream against poverty and despair,
dream against pain and anger,
dream against hostility and discrimination,
dream against all that divides people,
against all that holds them down,
and against all that oppresses them...

And: we can help the old dream come true.
We can hear Isaiah's poem as God's Christmas message to us. We can learn it by heart, pass it on, and be light and hope for each other.
We can become Christmas people tonight and carry Christmas out into the world, because the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...
Amen.