

“The Light Shines in the Darkness: #morecomfort”

December 18, 2017

Angels Among Us series – Blue Christmas

WELCOME:

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, we’ve been talking about how angels played an important part in Jesus’ birth story. An angel came to Zechariah, who was the father of John the Baptist. Angels came to Mary and Joseph, too, before Jesus’ birth – and then the shepherds to share the good news of this birth of a Savior.

Blue Christmas is a time to come to God in prayer for the hope and healing that the birth of Jesus offers. Many of us gathered here are grieving – perhaps it’s the loss of a loved one – recently or not, the loss of a job, struggles in relationships, health concerns, or other issues that make it difficult to feel like we can “rejoice and be glad” in this season when the atmosphere pushes us to be “merry and bright.”

In truth, the reality of Jesus’ birth is that pain and uncertainty surrounded everything that happened, so we gather to acknowledge that in our own lives while knowing that the birth of our Savior connects to our own humanity. This service also falls very close to the longest night of the year, so we remember the power of light to dispel darkness. I pray that this is holy space and safe space for you to come to God just as you are and offer your prayers.

A reading from the Gospel of John 1 – from *The Voice* translation:

This Gospel begins not with Jesus’ birth or John’s baptism but with a deliberate echo of the creation story in Genesis. It takes us back before time began to the moment when God interrupts the silence and speaks the cosmos into existence. Only John’s Gospel names Jesus as the *Logos* and declares that He existed long before time was measured. This Greek word is *logos* and carries a variety of meanings, all relating to the act of speaking. Sometimes *logos* is translated as “Word.” In this translation, you’ll hear the “voice” used. John declares that truth has culminated in the person of Jesus. No single word captures the complete meaning of *logos*, but “voice” has a number of advantages.

First, “voice” manifests the act of speaking. John intends that in Jesus God is speaking and revealing Himself to the world.

Second, a voice is distinct and personal. John desires that we know Jesus as the Son of God and believe in Him personally.

Third, “voice” is dynamic in that it reflects the robust and powerful activity of a living God. It is historical in that any act of speaking comes to expression and takes place in the real world as a “voice” calling, demanding a response. It challenges any notion

that the Christian faith can be reduced to rules, propositions, or doctrines that can be merely believed or dismissed and not lived out in our lives. In Jesus God is speaking and revealing Himself to the world, and in Jesus we hear the Voice of God.

In the beginning

¹ Before time itself was measured, the Voice was speaking.

The Voice was and is God.

² This *celestial* Word remained ever present with the Creator;

³ His speech shaped the entire cosmos.

Immersed in the practice of creating,

all things that exist were birthed in Him.

⁴ His breath filled all things

with a living, breathing light—

⁵ A light that thrives in the depths of darkness,

blazes through murky bottoms.

It cannot and will not be quenched.

MEDITATION:

The light shines in the darkness...

A light that thrives in the depths of darkness...

These words make me think of my own fear of the dark as a kid. I grew up in an old farmhouse, and my room was upstairs. At night, I'd turn on every light to make my way to my room at the end of the hallway. And still, my kids want the light left on and door left open until they fall asleep.

So these are powerful words of comfort from the Gospel of John – very different than the birth story with Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and magi. A light shines in the darkness. We know that the light of one small candle in the darkness is enough. Certainly the presence of God in Jesus is enough to dispel fear, and yet we're here because we need space to offer God our fears and worries, our sorrows and concerns.

This time of worship is always powerful for me because of so many I know who are hurting. Recent losses and life situations that make it hard to celebrate are real. I encountered someone last week who told me that she was learning more about the power of prayer in a difficult time for her and a family member who is hospitalized. She asked for prayer for herself, and for me, it was an example of light in the darkness – of knowing that prayer makes a difference and the comfort we receive from prayer. It was also a picture of what grace looks like – receiving help and even asking for it. She even told me that she had never asked for prayers for herself before because she always thought it was selfish. She said, "I get it now."

Painful memories can also bring us here. One older person I know said, “Christmas isn’t for me, but Easter is a wonderful time.” She shared painful memories of Christmas seasons in her past – a time when family members had passed away or were laid off - or just a difficult season.

And she told me about a pastor who said to her, “But how would we have Easter without Christmas?” Indeed, how would we celebrate a Savior – risen, resurrected – without the reality of the Incarnation – God who comes in the flesh to be with us? Later in John’s Gospel we hear powerful words: The Word became flesh and lived among us. That light shining in the darkness offering comfort and hope.

And I want to share another story of angels and comfort. Betty Kinney offered this reflection as a part of our Advent theme on “angels among us.”

Are there angels among us? Perhaps not in the strict Biblical sense, but as we go down this journey of life, there are occasions when we deem God has indeed put angels among us.

It was a Saturday in September. It was the beginning of the 6th week in Ann Arbor as I walked into my husband’s hospital room. During that time, we had celebrated our 37th anniversary sharing cake with the staff.

The doctor was waiting to talk to both of us. His news was the final medical report we would receive. There was no more that could be done for Gary. A few hours later, Gary asked me if he could go home. I immediately began to make arrangements for his trip back to Muskegon that same day.

It’s hard to count your angels and your blessings when, at the time, you are hurting so much. Looking back, those angels who gave me support, caring and love, along with God, carried me through that most difficult time.

My first angel – We arrived home around 9:30 that night. Unbeknownst to me, Gary’s brother had been sitting in his car, in the dark, for over two hours waiting for our arrival. He helped me get Gary in the house and settled in.

My second angels – We called our 3 children the next morning to tell them their Dad was home and his time with us was short. Two were in Kalamazoo, one attending grad school and one an aviation instructor for Western Michigan University, while the third was a teacher in North Carolina. The following evening the front door opened, and our 3 children walked in together – stating they were here to stay with us, to spend time with their Dad, and help out. Our family was complete.

More angels – My neighbors and friends. My neighbor-friends watched over our house and came at just the right times when I needed them. Also the weekend I brought Gary home was my friends annual “Girls Weekend Away.” Those 13 ladies kept checking on me, prayed for us, and a couple came back early because they said they needed to be there.

I do not necessarily believe in “coincidence.” God is not the only one who is busy among us. I believe God gives us “angels” during the darkest times in our lives when our need is too great to handle alone.

Sometimes we feel we must do it all by ourselves and find it hard to accept help. God gave me the signs; the angels arrived, and I was an accepting, grateful recipient. It is the love, the light, and the surrounding grace of those angels that gave me strength, hope, courage, and healing.

As I share this with you, I admit, I wonder if Gary could now be one of my unseen angels. I like to think that might be true. But really, who knows? Only God.

As we look around at nativity sets and see images of the birth of Jesus with Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds standing by, I’m reminded that the word “nativity” comes from the Latin meaning “to be born.” When we see the nativity, it really is the birthplace of hope and a reminder of God’s comfort to us in our humanity.

I invite you to see this short video that connects John’s Gospel with the story of Jesus’ birth.

There are angels among us bringing comfort in the midst of grief, pain, fear, and uncertainty. May God be with us where we are and remind us of the light that shines in the darkness. AMEN.