

“Jesus: A Weary World Rejoices”

December 24, 2020

Incarnation series – Christmas Eve – Livestream

Thanks to Matt and Lora Archer for sharing the gift of music with us. Never have the words of “O Holy Night” meant as much to me as they do this year: *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn...*

We are weary, aren’t we? It’s been a long year. If you’d have told me last Christmas Eve when we were gathered here in this sanctuary with candles ready to light that we’d be livestreaming a worship service next Christmas Eve because it’s the safest thing to do amid a global pandemic, I’m not sure how I would’ve responded. It would have seemed unimaginable!

And yet, here we are. We are connected – perhaps not in the way we most want to be – but here we are. It’s Christmas Eve, and we’ve gathered to welcome the Christ child and proclaim our trust in God’s presence in the world – to find those glimpses of hope – the thrill of hope that will offer us some solace and rest in our weariness.

We are weary – certainly because of the toll and changes that a virus has taken on our world, but also saddened by the reality of racism that continues to plague our hearts and souls and our larger systems and institutions. We are weary – disgusted and fed up with those who use power for personal gain instead of working for and serving the common good. We are weary and have had enough of disease and dis-ease, hatred and violence, grief and loss. We are weary, and yet called to rejoice because of the birth of a baby and the promise of Christ coming again to usher in the fullness of God’s reign. We are weary, and yet called to rejoice.

So how do we find the thrill of hope? Where do we find it? Certainly, the promise of this night offers it, but for me, it comes in small moments when I’m open to it, when I’m paying attention and looking for hope and can find holy moments in daily life. This year, one moment struck me. It was December 4 when I first saw this picture, which I asked permission to share tonight. **SHOW SLIDE:** Bos family picture

Our church family celebrated with the Hilleary and Bos families as they welcomed Azalea Kay. As soon as I saw this image, it reminded me of a nativity scene on its own, but then Danielle’s words spoke even more poignantly. She described the home birth as “beautiful and terrifying, whimsical and awkward, empowering and vulnerable.” There was another picture, too, which reminded me of an even more complete nativity with animals. **SHOW SLIDE:** Bos family picture with animals

Danielle’s words reminded me of the reality of Incarnation – how God chose to take on our humanity. Those words reminded me that everyone in the story of Jesus’

birth could probably identify with a level of weariness. Mary and Joseph on a journey far from home trying to find a place to welcome their son – God’s Son – while they navigate the world around them with the stares and whispers of others. Shepherds - least likely to be picked to receive Good News of great joy for all the people and sent to find this blessed sign. Angels met with skeptical looks. All of that plus the larger context - an emperor taking a census to increase taxes in a struggling economy and a political situation where people were oppressed. Weary and called to rejoice. We are not alone. That’s always been the way.

And hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah offers hope to those who are weary and hoping for a better day. The people in his time were facing outside threats and struggling to trust in God rather than military might. They need a thrill of hope, too.

So Isaiah talks about a new beginning and lifts up the work of God to bring salvation. The One God will send brings hope, and we hear a prophecy of Jesus in the description: Wonderful Counselor – a wise leader, Mighty God – a powerful leader, Everlasting Father – a concerned leader, Prince of Peace – a compassionate leader.

He is the One who comes to bring wisdom as we seek to live faithfully. His power is God’s power – not power that overtakes and “wins,” but the power of love that is always stronger than evil, death, and all the struggles that we face. His strength is everlasting; he doesn’t grow weary even when we do – even as we feel weary right now. He brings peace that comes as we trust in the Lord. Yes, Christmas is about Jesus’ birth, but it’s also about who Jesus is and what he does to triumph over sin and death to bring new life and hope.

I found a thrill of hope in the birth of a baby in the midst of a difficult and different year – and the joy of a loving family who welcomed her. I reflected on that thrill of hope for me and for them even as I prayed for so many who are weary: for people fighting this virus and caring for others who are, for many who have experienced infertility and infant loss, for children who don’t enter the world into a loving and excited family.

And I realized again that hope and weariness live together. They always have – even from the time that Jesus was born. We celebrate this incredible gift of love even as we struggle and wonder and pray. We rejoice even in those small moments of hope and grace that console us in our weariness. And we remember that God comes to be with us.

I want to share words from Madeleine L’Engle that helped remind me of the power and blessing of the Incarnation in real time. This is called “First Coming.”

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.

He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.
He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.
He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

As we worship tonight and remember the mystery, majesty, and vulnerability of the Incarnation – that God comes to be with us in our full humanity – I know that God cares deeply about us and knows our weariness and seeks a relationship with us. That's the message of the Incarnation – that Love came down and stayed down to be with us. We are not alone. We are never alone. God is with us.

May our weary hearts and souls find a thrill of hope to rejoice, be glad, give thanks for the gift of Love Incarnate – this Good News of great joy that is for us and all the people.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray...PRAYERS of the PEOPLE and the LORD'S PRAYER