

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
December 24, 2022
Christmas Eve
Christmas is for Zealots
The Rev. Leyla King

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There seems to me always to be a real tension on the biggest feast days – Christmas and Easter – of the Church. And this Christmas is no different. In some ways, the tension today is more pronounced than ever.

On the one hand, we hear beautiful and evocative poetry from Isaiah and the psalmist about the power and glory of the Lord, about the child who is the Messiah who will establish peace and justice, about the God who “will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth” and “equity.” We hear the angels proclaim to the shepherds that tonight, *tonight*, the great moment has come; the child is born; the Messiah has arrived. And all the things foretold by Isaiah and the psalmist are come to pass. And, as Christians, we are taught to believe this word of the Lord.

But on the other hand, we are faced with the reality of our lived experience – and oh how different it is from God’s kingdom, which we are told is made real tonight. “Light has shined” on “those who lived in a land of deep darkness,” Isaiah says. But we look around and all we see is the darkness of discontent: the polarization of our communities and the deep divisions between neighbors and friends. “The yoke of [the people’s] burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, [God has] broken,” says Isaiah. But all we hear in the headlines is how those with power and wealth kneel on the necks of the oppressed and down-trodden. Upon the birth of the child-Messiah, Isaiah proclaims, “the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.” But we know that war and conflict rage on – in Palestine and Peru, Ethiopia and Yemen – and of course Ukraine, where there is precious little fuel at all and the only sound louder than the tramping boots of warriors is that of dropping bombs.

How can we reconcile these two very disparate realities? How can we claim, as Christians, that the angels’ message to the shepherds – to us – is true right now, tonight, even as we know a reality that seems to say the exact opposite: earthly salvation is hard to find.

Here we are in this beautiful church, and even on this holy night, maybe especially on this night of nights for our faith, doubt creeps in. This wonderful story we tell about the baby in the manger who is the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Just Judge, God with us, can this story really be true? Or is it just and only that: a story? Nothing more than a kind of religiously-themed fairy tale.

If we dare to lean into our doubt for a moment – yes, even on this Christmas Eve – if we allow ourselves the freedom to imagine that it is all “just” a story, where would that leave us? Hopeless and distraught? I don’t think so.

Because even the fairiest of fairy tales still says something true and any child will tell you that *we* can make a story real.

Think of all the reinterpretations of fairy tales we hear in modern times – from *Ever After* to Elsa, storytellers today center on the agency of the heroes and heroines of these narratives as a reminder to our children that each of us has the power to make our dreams come true, to find happiness even in hard times, and to be in relationships with others that are mutually loving and life-giving.

And if that is true of imagined stories, how much more so is it true for THE story, the nativity narrative of incarnation that we hear tonight.

Of course, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is no fairy tale. It really did happen in Galilee “while Quirinius was governor of Syria” and Emperor Augustus ruled the Roman Empire. And Christian doctrine, tradition and experience over two millennia teach us that this Jesus really was and is the Redeemer, the Messiah, God made flesh.

And if we choose to believe that this is more than just a fairy tale, what difference will that make to us, in this beautiful and terrible reality in which we live, in this moment where the whole world seems intent upon the opposite of the peace of God?

That’s where we come in, where you and I have a role to play. Tonight, as God’s kingdom comes into contact with our human experience, we are invited into the age-old scene: will we make this true story *real* in our broken world? Will we make this real history *true* for our lives today?

In the letter to Titus, the writer proclaims that the birth of Jesus effects a change in the human beings of this world. He writes that Jesus came “for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” Zealous for good deeds.

Merriam-Webster defines the word *zealous* as “uncompromisingly enthusiastic.” Maybe that’s what happens tonight. Maybe the birth of the Messiah doesn’t change the outward furniture of the world but rather changes *us*.

If that’s the case, then believing in the story of the nativity, means believing that, while Jesus’ birth tonight will not magically solve all the present crises of our world, it does make us and has already made us his own people, his little brothers and sisters, a people who are “zealous for good deeds.” A people who are uncompromisingly enthusiastic about changing what they can in the world around them for the better. A people who, despite the brokenness around us, in the face of the real fears and frustrations of this present moment, refuse to give up and zealously continue to work towards the realization of the kingdom of God on this earth.

Christmas is our annual reminder that Jesus’ coming into this world is our call to action. Tonight we remember that because the baby was born in the manger, we can and will make *his* story *our* reality. Because God dwelt and still dwells among us, we will be uncompromising in our efforts to join the Messiah in his work of bringing peace, equity, righteousness and truth into this world that is so very hungry for it, in whatever small ways we can. Because *tonight* “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,” we can be “a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” Amen.