

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, December 15, 2019
Rev. Dr. David McKane

God comes anyway!

Isaiah 35:1-10.

Psalm 146:5-10.

Luke 1: 47-55

Prayer.

Christmas for many of us is filled with wonderful memories of Christmas carols, the music of The Messiah, homes filled with Christmas trees and family celebrations, gift buying and gift giving, the sending and receiving of cards, the mingling of souls.

It is a time that is filled with warmth and love and joy and peace. It is holy. It is precious. It is sacred.

For others it is the opposite of all that I have just said. The prisoner in his or her cell; the orphaned or abandoned child; those held hostage in China or elsewhere; the family spending Christmas in The Women's Shelter because of an abusive partner; Christian Palestinians caught between their Jewish and Muslim neighbours breaking the Body of Christ and praying for peace in the only land that Jesus knew and loved; the people driven from their homes and countries by war and aggression and living in refugee camps, their lives shattered by war, their farms and businesses taken from them; all those who will spend Christmas not with joy but with weeping for loved ones taken from them and a past that can never be recovered.

Christmas for such people is a painful reminder that peace on earth is not yet a reality; that Isaiah's great dream is yet to be realised; that joy comes to the world at great cost; that before we sing, Silent Night, Holy Night, we will have to slog through the swamplands of guilt and paddle across gulfs of division and hatred before we reach the shores of reconciliation.

David Napier, Professor of Old Testament at Yale Divinity School writes:

The season brings back all the seasons past.
The Christmases of every other year
Invest this time and charge it with a vast
And melancholy sense of poignant cheer.
Where and with whom? How many years before?
And now again we sing the songs, release
Our trembling fears; "O come let us adore"
The Christmas child who comes to bring us peace.

The loves of other years invest the time;
The wars of other years, and human hells,
The bloody, brutal contradictions chime
This year as loud as peace among the bells.
So peace on earth! But in this world of sin
He comes to call on us to bring Peace in.

God, you see, comes anyway!

Two thousand years ago in the streets of Bethlehem there would have sounded the boots of tramping warriors, the soldiers of Caesar Augustus and of Herod. And this year, too, for our world, in many respects, has changed little. The tramping boots of soldiers, nervous fingers clutching sten guns and automatic rifles will be visible at the edges of the parking lot of the Church of The Holy Family and on the streets of Bethlehem. They will peer out the port holes of troop carriers as they patrol the streets of Kabul, Baghdad, Beirut, Gaza, Syria, South Sudan and elsewhere.

But God comes anyway!

Into the occupied village of Bethlehem comes Mary, great with child.
Into the shell-shocked lives comes the hope of peace, the dream of a better tomorrow, the hope of a world in which children can run and play, and the tramp, tramp, tramp of soldier's boots and the ricochet of the sniper's bullet and the anguished scream of bodies torn apart by land mines is never to be heard again.

The promise of Christmas, you see, is that God comes anyway;
Comes as innocent and helpless as a newborn child; comes as eager and full of hope as an expectant mother;
Comes as caring and protective as a new father;
Comes as needy and as desperate as those without food, shelter, clothing and seeks within our hearts a place in which to reside, a stabling place in which to lay the heart and the head of the Almighty. Comes as those depicted on our Presbyterian World Service and Development inserts about our work in Malawi, Ghana, India and elsewhere.

And perhaps because it is Christmas we can look into the face of such despair and evil as exists in our world and hope against hope that the Child of Hope will be born; that the Child of Light will drive the dark away; that the Prince of Peace will rule in people's hearts; that, with the prophet Isaiah, the people that walked in darkness might see a great light; that the wastelands and the deserts might bloom again; that the human community will pour as much energy into waging peace as we pour into waging war; that enmity and hatred bred over centuries and secretly grown in the dark recesses of the human mind and the dark, dark cellars of the human heart might die to the light as lies die to the truth; that we might awaken on the morrow to a kinder, gentler world.

Is this not our hope and the hope of the world? Is this not our prayer for those who will spend this Christmas in Refugee camps around the world or in shelters here in London or other cities across Canada. Isn't this the hope expressed by Thomas Hardy in his poem **The Oxen**.

Christmas Eve and twelve of the clock,
"now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearth-side ease.

We pictured the meek, mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel
If someone said on Christmas Eve
"Come see the oxen kneel

In the lonely barton by yonder comb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Would we not also go, hoping it might be so? Hoping it might be so!

American Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner, somewhere in his writings suggests that Christmas Eve is an invasion of the holy. It is a phrase that has stuck with me like chewing gum to the bottom of my shoes, an invasion of the holy. The shepherds, up to their eyeballs in sheep dung, experience such an invasion of the holy that they leave their flocks and run all the way into Bethlehem to see this thing of which the angels told them.

Don't we, up to our eyeballs in the demands of family, work, world, run off our feet and hanging on by our fingernails to a job we need but one which does not feed us, to a relationship of which we need to let go but cannot, to all the "oughts," "should," "musts," that others lay upon us or to which we shackle ourselves, don't we also pray for or cry out for an invasion of the holy? And if it should ever happen, oh, if it should ever happen, would we not run all the way to Bethlehem with the shepherds hoping it might be so, hoping it might be so? And so we sing;

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by thine Advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight, O, come, O, come....

And despite the gloomy clouds of night God comes anyway!
That is the message of the Bible rising on its thousand pages.
That is the message of every tulip bulb lifting its head to the sun from beneath the dark earth.
That is the message of this Communion Table standing at attention, ready to feed the hungry,
or slake our thirst for righteousness,
That is the message proclaimed by loving parents and insightful counsellors, in the touch of a
hospital worker, in the pro bono work of a refugee lawyer, in the graciousness of a friend, in
the generosity of a stranger, in every loonie tossed into a Salvation Army Kettle or spent on a
Vince Morris' chocolate bars.

Let none of us leave this place today, on this third Sunday in Advent, doubting it could be
otherwise. Let me assure you that God comes anyway; into our hearts and into our lives; into
our broken world and into our fragmented relationships; into the muddle we make of things
and into the muddle that things make of us, and whispers hope, and calls us friend, and bathes
us in light, and cradles us in love.

O, come, O come Emmanuel...O bid our sad divisions cease and be for us the Prince of Peace....

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given,
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings born of heaven,
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

God comes anyway.

Amen! And to God be the glory!