

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, December 2, 2018
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

Finding Hope!

“And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.” St. Luke 2.

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.

During the Sunday sermon young George, who had lost all hope that the minister would ever finish preaching, began to fidget and make noise. The minister began to notice the young fellow, when all of a sudden, his mother leaned over towards George and spoke to him. Instantly George sat up and was as good as gold.

After the Sunday service was over, the minister was met at the church door by Mrs. Smith and her son George. "Pastor Al," said Mrs. Smith "I'm sorry my George was so noisy during your sermon." "That's OK, Mrs. Smith", said Pastor Al.

"These things we learn how to cope with as ministers but do tell me how you managed to get him to keep quiet?!"

"It was quite easy pastor," replied Mrs. Smith. "Fifteen minutes into your sermon, I leaned over to George and whispered in his ear, 'George, listen to me carefully. If you don't stop making such a noise, Pastor Al is going to lose his place in his sermon, and if he loses his place, he will have to start his sermon all over again.'

“And Pastor, he shut right up!"

I had a friend once who said to me “David, there are only three things you can’t get out of in this life- birth, death and taxes.” I think that might be true but...I haven’t seen Donald Trump’s tax return yet...

It had to be a cruel blow to Joseph that Caesar Augustus made the decree that people throughout the Roman world should return to their birthplaces to be registered for taxes. In his case it was some 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, probably on foot for Joseph, even if Mary rode a donkey, as we often think.

Now it is bad enough for us when the income tax return has to be filled out, especially if we have to pay more taxes than we thought.

But imagine having to walk a distance like between London and midway between Hamilton and Niagara Falls to pay taxes when transport was poor and robbers many? Then Mary, who was forced to go as well, was very pregnant and an unwed mother in Joseph’s home town.

Then when they got there, to discover the total anxiety of child birth in the street, because the local Inn was jammed to bursting with travellers, none of whom were willing to give a place to this Jewish girl who was clearly near her time. But then out of the blue the offer of a manger came.

It’s hard for us to imagine isn’t it, to be giving birth in a cattle stall with the less than romantic smells of manure and the movements of animals jostling in their stalls at night?

Now let’s remember that this was the reality of that the first Christmas!

I very much doubt that we would have planned the birth of Jesus this way. If it hadn’t been for the taxes, Mary and Joseph wouldn’t have either. Surely, we ask, since this was long planned, God could have done better?

Have you ever wondered how we might maintain hope in God in this difficult world?

Let's remember that one of the oldest and most persistent questions ever asked of the Christian faith is surely this one: How could a God of love permit this to happen to me?

Did Joseph and Mary ask that, when they could not find lodging, when hope appeared to be gone?

A lot of folks get angry at God. They think that God should fix the world...do something like eliminate starvation for the children of the world especially places like Yemen. It's just not right, they say, to see starving children with their tragic eyes pleading for food and life!

Why are our churches not so full today? Isn't it because we think that other things work better to sort out our lives than a church community? When we are sick, we go to the hospital without giving God a thought. If we need a drug we go to the pharmacist. When we want entertainment, we turn on the TV or watch stuff on line. Who needs a church community? And if there is a God why doesn't God fix things up? If Churches were like hospitals meeting real needs, they would be full, wouldn't they?

And we can go down the list...it's not fair that my husband died. It's not fair that I lost the love of my life to another woman. It's not fair that I am left alone to raise my kids as a single parent. It's not fair that I lost my job. It's not fair that I am so poor that I can't even afford decent food. It's not fair that my family doesn't love me, and I can tell you I really feel that at Christmas!

If religion did fix these sorts of things why the churches would be full, wouldn't they?

What we are saying is this: God does not fulfill our expectations. God doesn't seem to play the game of life our way. So where is the hope?

One Christmas in a US airport, a snowstorm set in. Flights were cancelled, and many people's expectations fell.

One fellow got mad. He went up to the ticket desk and began to curse and swear. He demanded that the plane fly. When that didn't happen, he demanded his money back. He then ordered a taxi, but the roads were blocked . **He was stuck there like everybody else.**

Suddenly a man with a lovely smile came up to him and said " I, too, want to get out of here. I've got my wife and kids waiting for me too, but I learned a long time ago that it **is better to live in the world of reality** than the world of might have beens. You could accept reality.

Talking about reality, let's admit some hard things that appear to be true. Let's agree that Christianity doesn't fix all things. Let's agree that **that** is reality. Now what do we do? Where do we go from here?

Why into that reality and let's explore it a bit!

Nowhere in Scripture does God promise to fix all our problems. But God did agree to something else. God always promised to be with us- in the doubt and the fear, in the struggle of right against wrong, in the fear of the unknown, in the pain and suffering, in the loss of our loved ones. In any problem that we can experience, God has promised to be with us.

One of the very last things that the historical Jesus said was this: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

There are no guarantees, however, that all our problems will be eliminated. We never have God on a string to jerk and make things work out for us. But we do have this iron clad promise of... **PRESENCE!**

I have a good friend who was a battlefield chaplain in the Canadian armed forces. I once asked him what kind of comfort he could give in those very tough situations. He paused and said "My ministry is a ministry of presence. I'm there with them."

Powerful, very powerful. Why? Because presence is not helplessness or weakness. At the end of life at a bedside it is the most precious gift we can give, to hold a hand, to be there... especially on a battlefield when a young soldier is dying far away from home and family...

What Presence means is this: Whatever challenges we face we don't have to face them alone. The Almighty will share them with us. That is what the word Emanuel means: "God with us!" That is the meaning of Christmas.

So where is the hope?

Vaclav Havel said: ***"I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere."***

The Christmas story is a revelation of a whole different way of thinking...it is hope from "elsewhere"...

Consider Isaiah over 600 years before, writing about a birth as we find it in the Septuagint translation. This version was put together by the 70 scholars of Judaism for those Jews who had left the Holy land and were dispersed. It was according to those scriptures, to be a special, unlikely birth, a **virgin birth**. Micah, a prophet at the same time period, prophesied that the birth would take place in little Bethlehem.

Then history, 600 years later, marches on into the reality of those times: **Taxes! Roman taxes!** Joseph, the man who lived in Nazareth, has to go home to Bethlehem.

(The echo is 600 years old)

"Bethlehem, Ephrata though thou be little amongst the thousands of 'Judah, yet out of Thee shall He come forth unto me, that is to be ruler in Israel... and then there are these amazing 10 God words: "whose going forth have been from old from everlasting."

Emmanuel promised 600 years before, "God with us" came!

This is quite a story isn't it? Note that it is not about **control** but **foreknowledge**. God didn't force Caesar Augustus to tax the world, but God knew this would force a Jewish peasant to make a trip to Bethlehem to register for taxes.

Note too that the difficulties are not eliminated. They are accepted and worked through. It's the same with the accommodation of a stable. How do you identify where the Christ child is to be born to shepherds on a hillside? Well a stable makes that simple!

The angel tells them that they were going to find him in an unexpected place-He will be wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a stable. Imagine Bethlehem and the gossip for a brief moment. "Elizabeth did you hear that a mother was in childbirth in the inn keepers stable last night? Poor dear!"

Imagine the shepherds asking where the baby was. "Was there a baby born in a stable?" Then they hear the gossip and say **That is the child we are looking for! And off they go with hurried feet!**

Note no manipulation. No glitz. Do we get it that if Jesus had been born to Herod that Herod would not have welcomed shepherds into his great Palace!?! Not a chance he would do that!!But this was the birth of a Saviour for all people, rich or poor.

And so, this most beautiful hope-filled story unfolds. It's a simple story about an unwed pregnant girl in trouble with nowhere to go, lying down in a barn and giving birth. But it is so much more...

Thomas Hardy captures it in a poem:

“Christmas Eve and 12 of the clock
Now they are all on their knees
An elder said, as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside 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 that **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 lowly bastion by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,
I should go with him in the gloom
Hoping it might be so!”

I often remember at Christmas time about what a farmer once said to me. He said: “On Christmas Eve, after the chores are done, I go out to the barn and I just stand there and let that first Christmas get in to me. It is just so right somehow that Jesus would be born in a manger among all the creatures he has made.”

When our lives are filled with God and there are no guarantees except the PRESENCE then a stable becomes fit for the King of Kings.

I have come to believe with Shakespeare that “There is a Divinity that shapes our ends rough hew them how we will.” That even taxes have to do with Christmas. That is how real the Great One is. And Christians are not exempt. They are taxed like everyone else.

I also believe that Caesar Augustus thought he knew what he was doing when he made that decree. Like Pontius Pilate whose ring has just been found in an archeological dig, I am convinced, that neither Roman ruler had the slightest clue as to what was really happening on their watch.

The challenge for us today is to accept the world as it is, not as we wish it to be and then go from there into planning a better world. I think that is the message of Emmanuel at Christmas: that what appears to be happening as momentous world events may not be the real story at all.

The hope is that the real story is this: that in the midst of birth, death and taxes, God is still working God’s purposes out- that all things are working out for good. That even although things are not as we wish them to be, that all the things that we complain about and think are not fair, nevertheless **all things will somehow work for Good...** and we can be a part of that great and good process.

As the inn keeper in the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel said, “Everything will be okay in the end and if it isn’t okay then it is not yet the end.”

And when it is good or not so good in the present, God promises to be with us. It’s an incredible promise isn’t it, unpredictable too, but I think entirely wonderful as well?

One of the many joys I have experienced coming to New St. James was meeting Sydney Vickers and her Hopes Hugs blankets that she gives to bring hope and love to anybody who might need it. Imagine the folks who lost loved ones in Humboldt suddenly receiving a blanket of hope from far away because a young woman called Sydney decided to do something?

Winona Smith was invited to crochet baby blankets which would be donated to a local pregnancy center for Christmas. For some reason she had a premonition that this seemed a very important thing to do. She did not know why. But she honored this feeling and asked some ladies to teach her how to crochet. She mastered the granny stitch and it was perfect for the baby blankets.

When she finished her first one, she was so proud of it that she decided to make more. She included a note in each blanket for the new mom:

“Little girls are sweet in their ruffles all pink,
Little boys in overalls look divine,
But no matter which one the Lord gives to you
A better Mom he never could find.”

One day a childhood friend of Winona’s called Karen, phoned her wanting to get together. They had not seen each other for years! Her friend Karen came over that afternoon and when she arrived at the door, they both screamed as if they were still in junior High together!

They had tea together and slowly the reason Karen had left all those years ago came out. The official line had been that her husband had a job offer in another city. The truth was that their daughter Kim was pregnant and was having a really rough time handling the reality of being an unwed mother, in her senior year, in High school.

Kim was even talking about suicide, so the family decided to move away to get away from the peer pressure of friends who wouldn’t necessarily understand.

So, they moved, hoping things would improve. However, things went from bad to worse and Kim became more and more depressed. But then a ‘God thing’ happened and a certain grief counsellor a Mrs. Barber came into Kim’s life. She was wonderful with Kim. Her parents began to hope again.

As the time came closer for delivery Kim had still not made up her mind, even although her mother Winona had made it quite clear that she was hoping to have a grandchild and would provide a home for them both! Karen and her husband prayed, hoping that Kim would keep the child.

Finally, the day came, and Kim had a six-pound baby girl, little Kayla. Kim had still not decided what to do with the child.

Karen said that Mrs. Barber came to the hospital and she had a package with her. It was a pastel package containing a hand crocheted baby blanket inside.

At this point in Karen’s story, Winona felt a huge lump coming in her throat. She felt limp all over, but she tried not to show it and she kept listening to Karen’s story. Could it possibly be the baby blanket she had crocheted?

Karen noticed the look on Winona’s face and asked if she was alright? Winona said that she was fine and wanted to hear more...

“Well,” said Karen, “There was a baby blanket and also a little note. Something about little girls with ruffles and little boys in overalls and a word of encouragement about becoming a new mom.

When Kim asked Mrs. Barber where it had come from, she said that it came from a pregnancy center. One such center in the State had a surplus and this was the one she got.

Karen said that at the time daughter Kim was so moved, that a complete stranger would be kind enough to put that much time and effort into a blanket for her baby. She told her mother Karen and her father that the little poem gave her hope and confidence and made all the difference in helping her decide to keep the baby. A year later Kim married her stand- in for the historical Joseph, a young man who loved her and her child with all his heart. It was Bethlehem all over again...

Karen finished her story like this: She said “I am grateful for so many things, but one most of all. We are grateful for that kind person who made that little baby blanket for our daughter and her

baby. I just wish I could give her a big hug and tell her how much she is loved and appreciated by our family!

“You can,” said Winona and then she leaned over and gave her that hug!

Baby Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes, baby Kayla in a crocheted baby blanket. And is this not the way, so often, that true hope comes? It is unlooked for, unfathomable and always in the very center of realities like birth death and taxes.

For God moves in a mysterious way

His wonders to perform;

He plants His footsteps in the sea

And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines

Of never-failing skill

He treasures up His bright designs

And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;

The clouds ye so much dread

Are big with mercy and shall break

In blessings on your head.