

SO THIS IS GOOD NEWS?



Scripture:

Malachi 3:1-4

¹See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 1:68-79

Prophecy of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist when he named him John.

Listen for the words: mercy, forgiveness, the Way, fear and peace.

⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



WELCOMING NEW MEMBERS

This is another joyous day of hope for our Church of the Roses, a day when we celebrate new members who have accepted our invitation to “belong” here as members of our church family. We all belong to God, but I am sure

God is happy when we take a bigger leap of faith and decide to make a commitment to a church in an effort to help build up the kingdom of God on earth here in this place in Santa Rosa.

Jesus came to show us in the flesh that we belong to God. Jesus started the church as a community of people who dedicated themselves to worship God as a group, to spread the Good News of God's love, to be living examples to the world of what following the ways of Christ looks like, and to support one another with love and understanding to empower us to go out and help those in need. You belong here and that should reassure you that if you ever feel lonely, you have a family here to call upon that cares about you. That is what Jesus wants us to be for one another to show the world how to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Welcoming new members during Advent is just what Christ would want us to do. Christ started out forming a Christian community with shepherds and angels, both the rich kings, the powerful, and the poor common folks, and common creatures all coming together to worship him as a baby. The first Christian worship service happened in a cave-like stable, with God's beloved creatures adoring Christ the baby God lying in a feed trough, with the angels singing the hymns. The light pierced the darkness of that era, and it was good news.

LUKE

The scripture today is read and heard every Advent. It may seem to us just routine, a nice reminder of the reason for the season. Yet, let's look at this Advent. Is it really good news, even when terror seems to be striking too close to home?

When Jesus came, he didn't come to just make us feel good, although his constant reminders that we are made in the image of God should make us feel good, and his reminders that he came to give us abundant life, should give us hope. Christ's coming as the Prince of Peace should give us a goal for the future, and his reminder that nothing will separate us from the love of God, should give us the reassurance we need to blunder through our days knowing that when we stumble and make mistakes, forgiving love is always waiting for us at the end of our struggles. (And in the middle of the journey, too.)

Still, how is Christ's coming good news? He came at a time when the world was full of turmoil. The Roman army was constantly intimidating the common people, and especially those who believed in God. The people in power were threatened by the faith of the Jews because it diverted allegiance away from Caesar. Tiberius Caesar, who was the second Emperor of Rome, wanted all the people to think of him as their God. So the Romans were constantly trying to keep the Jewish people occupied, and oppressed by over-taxing them, setting limits on their gatherings for worship, and threatening them with death if they did anything that looked like a rebellion against Rome.

JUSTICE, RIGHTEOUSNESS AND LOVE

When Christ came with an agenda of justice, righteousness, and love, he had supernatural power over the people beyond anything the Roman government had ever seen before, so Christ's arrival was not good news to the politically powerful Romans. Christ's coming was really bad news because they feared losing their hold over the people. They worried that Christ might actually empower the common folks to see hope and peace for their futures rather than fear and death.

Instilling fear was the way the Roman army kept control of the people. But Christ came to show them that although life on earth was hard, the struggles and oppression would be overcome. Jesus came to set them free with truth, justice, and mercy and with a more cosmic sense of wonder and a deeper understanding of their relationship to God and all of creation.

We need this sense of wonder especially now when fear and anxiety oppresses us currently after the San Bernardino and Paris attacks.

THE COSMIC CHRIST

Matthew Fox in his book: *The Cosmic Christ* describes the sense of wonder for the birth of Jesus Christ, who embodied the Good News that God is love and mercy.

Matthew Fox says, "Now let's take a look at Luke's story of the birth of Jesus. An angel comes to Mary -- that means the cosmic forces come to Mary -- and tell her that she is going to bear a child. And "The Spirit will overshadow you," we are told. That same word, "overshadow," is used in the Transfiguration in Luke's gospel. The Transfiguration story is a perfect story of the Cosmic Christ because it is about the moment when Jesus went to the mountain top with three friends. For the first time they realized Jesus was not just a good friend and a wonderful fellow, but He was the Christ, the "I Am," and that He was calling all of us in some way to be the Good News with him.

ANGELS AND SHEPHERDS

Now back to the birth narrative. What happens when the child is born? Angels go to the shepherds, armies of angels we are told. And who are shepherds?

Shepherds are people who live close to sheep. They smell like sheep. But the angels choose them and say to the shepherds, "The glory of the Lord shines upon you and there will be peace to people of all good will."

You see, it's a universal story that all people will celebrate the Christ Child. You don't have to be a king, or a priest in the church, or a well educated elder in the church. All people are invited to celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace who loves us all equally.

Dr. Matthew Fox also tells this story in his book *The Cosmic Christ*: "A Methodist theologian from Australia was invited to give a lecture in Africa. As he lectured, his talk was translated, sentence by sentence, into Swahili. He would speak one sentence and the translator would translate, then he'd move on. (When I preached in Kenya they did this for me. It was a long sermon!)

So when the Methodist preacher came to

one part of his lecture, the translator stopped when he said, "In Sidney, Australia today, the number one spiritual problem is loneliness." The translator stopped and turned, kind of puzzled, and so the speaker repeated the sentence. "The number one spiritual problem is loneliness." The translator went off and huddled with five or six other Africans for ten minutes. He came back to the microphone and said, "Sir, I am sorry, but in our language, we do not have a word for loneliness."

Fox says, "This is a significant story because there is a lot of loneliness, a lot of cosmic loneliness in western civilization today. But in native peoples, such as native African people or native American people, there is less cosmic loneliness, because they are more at home in the universe. They consider the whole universe to be their home, their temple where God dwells."

THE PRESENCE OF DIVINITY

We westerners have become so self-centered we have missed the beauty, the awe, the wonder, and the suffering of the rain forests, of the soil that is disappearing today at a rate of six billion tons a year in America alone, of the waters, and now of the air, as we learn that the ozone layer has a hole in it over Antarctica as large as a continent. So the suffering of Mother Earth is directly related to the fact that we have forgotten the Cosmic Christ that is the presence of Divinity in every creature throughout the universe. Every leaf is a Cosmic Christ. Every porpoise and every whale, every drop of water, every star, every galaxy, and we now know we live in a world of a hundred billion galaxies.

**"Every one of us is a glittering,
glistening mirror of God."**

In his book, Dr. Fox quotes the scientist Gregory Bateson, who said, "What is the pattern that connects things in the universe? What is the pattern that connects the orchid to a lobster, the Crab Nebula to the genes in our bodies?"

Bateson answered his own question. He said, "Christ is the pattern that connects. Christ is the one who holds all things together in heaven and on earth. This is the Biblical tradition, that the universe is held together by the Divine in Jesus, but also in all the creatures that are blessed with the presence of Divinity in them."

The Book of Wisdom says, "The Spirit of the Lord fills the whole world and that which holds all things together knows every word that is said." God who became incarnate in Jesus holds all things together. So we don't have to feel either afraid or lonely in the universe. When we feel lonely in the universe we become arrogant. In the last few hundred years, western civilization has lost the sense of the cosmos, making us not only lonely but also arrogant toward other creatures and even devaluing of ourselves.

The Cosmic Christ then is both the pattern that connects and the beauty in every creature.

The Good News is truly Good News. Celtic Christians (our Scottish ancestors) highlight how Christ is within us and before us and around us always. Christ connects us together and inspires us to belong to one another. Jesus Christ is coming again. May you pause this Advent, look towards the heavens and breathe in deeply the wonder of it all! Amen

As part of the Invitation to the Table for Communion, the following Ann Weems poem was read:

In Search of Our Kneeling Places

**In each heart lies a Bethlehem, an inn
where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.**

**When we are Bethlehem-bound we
experience our own advent in his.**

**When we are Bethlehem-bound we
can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars, not
hearing angel voices.**

**We can no longer excuse ourselves by
busily tending our sheep
or our kingdoms.**

**This Advent let's go to Bethlehem and
see this thing that the Lord
has made known to us.**

**In the midst of shopping sprees let's
ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.**

**Through the tinsel let's look for
the gold of the Christmas Star.**

**In the excitement and confusion, in
the merry chaos let's listen for
the brush of angels' wings.**

**This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.**

**Benediction: Now may the grace of
our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you now and forever more.
Amen**



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