

Christmas: Hope in the Midst of Darkness

Luke 1:26-38
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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We have just heard Luke's familiar version of the story where the birth of Jesus is foretold. It is commonly referred to as "The Annunciation" because the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear a son.

The angel instructs her to name him Jesus, and reveals that the child will be holy, and be called Son of God. After Mary questions the plausibility of all this actually occurring, the angel shares the comforting words of hope, "Nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary, reflecting the Old Testament language used by prophets when faithfully accepting the call of God, responds with, "Here am I." She humbly adds that she is a servant of the Lord, and that she is willing for the words of the angel to come to pass.

Now, as most of you are aware, there is a great deal of scholarly debate about the origin of what are called the birth narratives in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. I personally find this discussion to be very enlightening, especially from an intellectual engagement perspective.

But instead of focusing on the possible origins of these particular stories this morning, **I want to say a few things about the actual origin of Christmas. I want to begin by asking you if you have ever wondered why the birth of Jesus is celebrated on December 25th?**

That specific date is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. And we don't have any record of birth announcement cards sent out by Mary and Joseph to all their friends and relatives.

Well, here's the story. Some of it you may be familiar with, some of this may be new information. Our human ancestors, for thousands of years previous to the birth of Jesus, celebrated what we now call the **winter solstice** - the day of the year with the shortest number of daylight hours. This is the turning point in the calendar year after which the amount of light in each day stops decreasing and begins to increase.

Ancient civilizations used this event to celebrate the sun's regaining of its powers. With the amount of sunlight beginning to increase with each passing day, the forthcoming return of warmth and the new life of spring was just around the corner.

In those ancient days the sun itself was considered to be a god. So in the third century after the birth of Jesus, Roman Emperor Aurelian officially declared a winter solstice festival that was to be celebrated on December 25th. This date was designated as the birthday of the deity they called the Unconquered Sun.

Less than a hundred years later, after Emperor Constantine declared the Roman Empire would become a Christian state, Christians in the fourth century could find no better way of rivaling this popular pagan deity festival than by using this date to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. So they renamed this day as the birthday of the Sun of Righteousness. We now call it Christmas Day.

There are perhaps many Christians who might think that knowing the actual history and origins of Christmas Day diminishes the meaning of this holy day, perhaps even profane it. I, on the other hand, think it can only enhance our understanding of the Christian faith that we profess.

For one reason, it forces us to focus not on a specific date, but on what really matters – the significance of the event of the birth of Jesus. Yet as it turns out, however, the designation of December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth has taken on an important theological significance in its own right.

Think about it. One of our brightest religious observances takes place during the darkest part of the year. Is it not appropriate that Christians, as part of the long-line of the human family, also celebrate when light overcomes darkness? And notice how the following words from the **Gospel of John** take on a deeper theological significance when we read in chapter 1:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

It is also interesting to take note that Christmas Day actually begins not at daybreak with the coming of the morning - but earlier at the strike of midnight. Therefore, it was at the darkest hour of the darkest night – not the warm glow of the morning – that the shepherds of the gospel story heard the angels sing.

And in the story of the magi, notice that their journey was guided not by the sun, but by a star – a metaphorical story of yet another light shining in the darkness.

For many people, there are spiritual parallels in their own journey of faith. **Many folks, perhaps yourself, have come to a deeper faith in God not in the daylight (which metaphorically we equate with the good times of life) but in the dark (the times of great difficulty or hardship or turning points in our life). It is often at those dark times when we become more intentional about reaching for the light, in the form of faith, to brighten the darkness that we often find ourselves engulfed by.**

Speaking of darkness, it's fair to say that throughout the world this past year of 2008, we continued to witness that the darkness is truly vast. We must

never deny the reality of evil, injustice, sin, and tragedy. But through it all, as we have also witnessed this past year, there have been many times when the light has broken through the darkness. So let me ask you: **Where and how have you witnessed and experienced a path of light this past year?**

Another word for that light is hope. It is crucial that we never fail to recognize and celebrate hope – especially the hope that comes from recognizing the very real presence of Christ, and believing in the promises of God. Pastor A. Powell Davies writes:

So, let us open our hearts to Christmas. Open them to all the hope that stands against a world that wastes away with evil things; open them wide enough for gentleness in a world that [can be] bitter and harsh; for loveliness in a world that is [often] desolate; for faith and its joy and the song of its joy, that sings in the presence of God.

Christmas asks each of us where our hope actually rests. What are the things we look to for our life's security, promise, fulfillment, and meaning?

I think that all too often we fall into the temptation to look only to ourselves – to our reputation, our accomplishments, our virtue, our talent, our intellect, our finances, or other marks of self-sufficiency – for the hope to sustain us. While those things are important, they aren't enough.

Corporately, society primarily places its hopes in the sanctity of the nation, in the democratic process, in a good leader, in military power, in financial stability, and in the promises of technology. While these things also aren't bad in and of themselves, **our true hope is tragically misplaced if it only rests with ourselves, our nation, or our culture.**

Enter the importance of living a life of faith. Throughout our journey of faith our hope, as Christians, rests in God's promise to always be with us. That, by the way, is the literal translation of the word "Emmanuel" – **"God is with us."** **And that is perhaps the primary focus of the meaning behind the story of Jesus' birth, and the meaning of Christmas.**

This promised presence of God is the Light of the world. The Light has come into the world, and it dwells not only among us but within us as well. And the good news is that the darkness has not, and cannot, put it out.

This is important to us individually and also in the understanding of our mission and ministry here at College Hill. Through those of us called to be part of the body of Christ, the Church, **we are to reach out as a beacon of light and hope for others.**

Perhaps you, or someone you know, or even a complete stranger that you come across this week are **in need of hope this Christmas.** Perhaps you are feeling pushed to the margins of what you want your life to be. If so, you are not alone. Know that each and every one of us is in need of hope. So find courage and encouragement in knowing that the winter solstice, the day of greatest darkness, is now about to pass – at least for this year.

From the earliest times people have lit a fire to invite the sun back into their lives, celebrating the coming of light back into the darkness of their lives. This is why we light an additional candle on the Advent Wreath each week of Advent – to recognize the coming and increasing light of Christ. That is why we will light the Christ Candle and individual candles on Christmas Eve as we sing “Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright”.

So this is my Christmas wish for you this year: a prayer for light to break through the darkness – and in turn, that through you it will be as a ray of light for others.

This is what the Christmas story reveals: the Light of God was born that first Christmas night, and continues to shine upon us, bringing us hope in the midst of our darkness. And from that hope, faith and joy. Let us live in this hope!

Amen.

Resource:

Hope in the Midst of Darkness, by the staff of Sojourners Magazine, Dec. 1977.