

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday of Advent
Year A

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November 29, 2015

Text: Isaiah 9:2-7

Title: “Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam: Bethlehem or Bedlam?”

One year when I was in seminary and Lynn was studying at Ohio State University, we did not get our Christmas shopping done when we were in Ohio. We were both focused on studies and work and just didn't get to it. We were both feeling stressed. So when we came home for Christmas, we had our list and decided we would do all of our shopping on one day. I remember walking through various stores, almost grabbing at straws trying to decide what to get and for whom. It was one of the least satisfying Christmases I can remember. It felt more like task completion than thoughtful gift giving because that is exactly what it was. We were in such a rush to get it done that the joy was sucked right out of the experience.

I know we are not alone in the experience of feeling the stress of the holidays. Every year it comes. Every year we come to this season with the joy of giving and seasonal cheer and anxiety brought on by the unrest in the world and the stress of having to prepare for all that comes with Christmas. It's beautiful and inspiring on the one hand but it's also crazy chaotic sometimes. We want the kind of peace that sees a lion lying down with the kid and children over an adder's den and spears being transformed into pruning hooks, but instead we have jets being shot down over Turkey, and people getting up at 4 a.m. for Black Friday specials pushing and shoving their way to the best deals of the year. Instead of peace, God's gracious peace, we live in tension of the world and with the stress of holiday expectations whether ours or those we've inherited.

How are we supposed to prepare in Advent for the coming of the Prince of Peace when we live in the midst of the stress of the world and we feel that stress?

Yet, that's not unlike what the first Christmas was like. Nor was it unlike the days before Christmas when Isaiah was God's spokesperson to the people of Judah in Jerusalem some 800 years before Jesus was born. We love Christmas carol simplicity and peacefulness of “O, Little Town of Bethlehem”s and “Silent Nights”. They sooth the spirit, calm the anxiety of the soul, and I long to sing them every year on Christmas Eve with candles aglow in the sanctuary, lighting all of your faces. We might long for the serene Christmas card image of Bethlehem in which all seems well, the world at peace, the Savior of the world born calmly in the warmth and safety of a well-built barn.

But the truth is, that's not how it was. The truth is that Joseph and Mary were forced to

travel some 70 miles on foot. This was not a leisurely vacation, planned and prepared for in order to enjoy themselves. This wasn't about visiting with family around the Christmas ham and exchanging gifts thoughtfully prepared. This was the government telling them they had to go. And why? All the better to tax them and everyone else! It was about taxing efficiency: that is why Mary and Joseph travelled. So the ruler of the empire told them he didn't really care if you are nine months pregnant. You will go! Doesn't really care whether or not you have a donkey or a horse or a chariot. You will go! Doesn't really care if Hotels.com has a room reserved for you or not. You will go! Just go! Get there or face the consequences. And Roman consequences were hardly peaceful. These are the people who crucified people publicly in order to send the message you'd better not cross them. (Pun intended.) These are the people who conquered territory after territory because they had perfected systematic warfare and rapid travel through the building of roads enabling military forces to travel quickly from one region of the empire to another. These are the people whose rulers came to proclaim themselves as gods.

This trip of Mary and Joseph's was more like the trip of Syrian refugees fleeing the violence in their homeland with no one willing to give them hospitality than it was a family making a trip to grandma's house for Christmas dinner.

Then, when they do arrive, they can't find a place to stay. Poor as they are they find themselves in a shed with animals. It doesn't sound very silent to me, nor sterile. If you've ever been in a barn with animals, you know the smells. There may have been the sweat smelling hay, but there were other odors, too. "How still we see thee lie" may be the words to our beloved hymn but Bethlehem was hardly silent or peaceful.

I remember going to Bethlehem for the first time. I couldn't wait to get there. Lynn and I were on a pilgrimage to see the Holy Land, a 10 day trip to walk in the places Jesus walked. It was something I had wanted to do for years, since taking a class in seminary on the geography of the Holy Land. I wanted to see the sights, understand more deeply some of Jesus' parables based on the land, walk in the areas he walked, see the Sea of Galilee. I wanted to go to be closer to Christ, to simply be present in that holy land.

So on the appointed day, the bus headed toward Bethlehem from the hotel in Jerusalem where we were staying. It's about 6 miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, half the distance from our home to this church. Just outside of Bethlehem is a flat area called the Shepherd's field. I don't remember seeing shepherds that day but they do still graze sheep there. On the bus our guide warned us to beware of pick pockets who are known to victimize tourists in the square outside the church of the Nativity which was built according to the direction of Helena, mother of Roman Emperor Constantine, in the 4th century and has been modified over the centuries due to damage created by revolts and fires. But it is still believed to be the spot in which Jesus was born.

The bus pulled up to a large courtyard with a stone square leading to the church. There were vendors all around selling trinkets, some of them rather aggressively. Children were there, too, begging for money. We didn't encounter any pick pockets but I remember putting my wallet in my small passport purse that I wore under my shirt and hung around my neck. There was nothing peaceful or silent about being there. It was noisy, commercial and unsettling.

Once inside the church, we waited in a long line. There is a cave under the chancel area of the church which is the front area of the worship space where the leaders of worship stand when presiding over worship. There were very old icons hanging on the walls throughout the sanctuary, the heavy smell of incense from centuries of Greek Orthodox priests using it in

worship. The line formed on the right side of the sanctuary. And once we reached the front there were two or three stairs carved in the stone, the bedrock. Stepping down the stairs, they led into a small cave, maybe 25 or 30 feet long and 20 feet wide. Purple tapestries hung against the solid stone walls of the cave. To the right in a little niche was a 15-pointed silver star riveted to the marble base which is the traditional place of Jesus' birth. It was crowded and people were nudging me to move. I wanted to just hang there for a moment and try to absorb the moment, try to imagine what it might have been like when he was born in this ancient city, in this cave of a stable I had always imagined was a wooden barn like the one we use to remember the birth. But it wasn't a wooden barn. Stables were often caves in the holy land, and this one was the place people remembered Jesus' actual birth, so I wanted to spend some time there. It wasn't possible. The crowds. The nudging forward, the small space, the dank smells. It wasn't peaceful. It wasn't silent, and to be honest it didn't feel very holy.

Eight hundred years before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Isaiah was the prophet for this very area in which the cave is still visited by pilgrims like Lynn and me. He wrote of "those who lived in a land of deep darkness", of "the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor...the boots of tramping warriors and...garments rolled in blood." His people were threatened by the Assyrians, another great superpower of that age that, like the Roman Empire of Jesus' day, invaded territory after territory and forced citizens to leave their homeland and travel to places the rulers told them to go. In the midst of this threat, Isaiah proclaimed hope:

²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace

In the midst of threat, in the midst of the chaos of life, Isaiah proclaims the hope of God

come in a child. He is not called mighty warrior, conqueror of peoples, general of armies. Instead we hear different descriptions: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. As the carol, "Lo, How a rose" tells us, Isaiah predicted his coming and the Mary brought him into the world "to show God's love aright/She bore for us a Savior/When half spent was the night."

Jesus was born into the bedlam of the world, in conditions hardly desirable for the Prince of Peace, in order to reveal God's love and in that way to be our Savior. He came to show us what loving God with all we are and all we have and our neighbors as ourselves looks like. He does not come to offer us an escape from the challenges we face but rather to give us peace in the midst of them. Evil in the world comes. Chaos and stress does not stop, but Christ comes in the midst of all of it to show us that God enters the very chaos of the world with the kind of vulnerability that invites us to draw close to God like a mother her infant child, a father his baby boy. To draw near out of profound joy and gratitude, knowing all the while that though the storms of life continue their threatening noise, the terrorists offer their attempts to make us all afraid, the dictators still force people to flee in fear for their lives, those in power do not stop sometimes abusing that power to take from those under their charge, though people still push others impatiently so that they can see the place where the Prince of Peace was born, though all these forces still create bedlam, we have a choice about how we will respond.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," says the prophet Isaiah, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us" (vv. 2, 6). The birth of Jesus reminds us that children can change things for the better. Since the time of Isaiah, people have dreamed that "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6).

That little child is Jesus. As well as the children of God who follow him.

Receive the light. Accept it, embrace it and then share it -- in whatever way you can. Resolve to reflect the light of Christ into the dark places that you see around you. Do whatever you can to make the world a safer, more secure and healthier place. Take actions that establish justice and righteousness in the world -- actions that help to build right relationships between people and God and between people one to another.

Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle.

You don't have to be a member of the United Nations to broker a peace between Russia and Turkey, but you can visit a lonely relative, invite a neighbor to church, tutor a troubled teenager or plant a community garden.

Accepting and sharing the light of Christ is the best hope for our future. It is THE WAY we can still find the peace of Bethlehem in the midst of Bedlam.