

## **“Good News, Great Joy”**

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Saturday, December 24, 2016**  
**Christmas Eve**

**Readings from scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-14**

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You 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. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For 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. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

*Isaiah 9:2-7*

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”*

*Luke 2:1-14*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, on this holy night we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Spirit. We open ourselves to the gift that you give to the world this night. We ask that you take all the words that we carry within, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart to share this evening. Take them all, bless them, transform them and make them the living word of Jesus Christ, a word that will be birthed in our hearts, in our minds and

in our souls. And let that word guide us and teach us, and tonight, let that innocent, lovely word nurture us in our faith. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On this Christmas evening when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the firstborn son of Mary, wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. On this night when we gather with expectations and joy and celebration, the question that I have and that I have been praying about all week, is how does the church embody this humble gift, this Christ Child laid in a manger without room in the inn? What does this child teach us, the church? And what gifts might we, the church, share with the world if we become that child again, innocent and loving? And as I was praying about this invitation, the words of St. Ignatius came to mind and his way of Bible study where he asks that when you read the scripture, you place yourself in the person or character of those we read about.

So I wonder this night, not just about what it means for us to be the Christ Child, but I also wonder what it might be like for us if we embody the presence of Mary, if we are faithful like this innocent one through whom the Holy Spirit brings the child. I wonder what it might be like for us if we see ourselves as the angels in this story, as holy messengers, as those who show up to offer good news in surprising times. As I was holding all of this in my heart, I had spiritual direction this week. My spiritual director invited me to relocate my understanding of self in the economy of God. For we in the west worship a God who is powerful, powerful persons who come together in the Trinity. Our God is omnipotent, all-powerful, omniscient, all-knowing and omnipresent, all-present. This is the God we learn about and know through our catechisms and our education who seems almost like a superhuman form that we project all this strength and power and knowledge upon. But he invited me to think about what it would be to locate myself in the understanding of the economy of God as the Eastern Church sees it. They worship a triune God of mutually indwelling love, where the holy flows freely from one person to the other, love pouring out from one to the next, each member of the Trinity bathing in this exuberant love that never ends. And then in the middle of this tension between all-powerful, all-knowing and all-present and never-ending flow of love we have Christmas Eve and the story of the Christ Child, born, wrapped in cloth and laid in a manger.

So tonight I want to invite you to find yourself in this story. Find yourself in the words of the angels proclaiming Good News. Find yourself in the growing response of Mary as she contemplates what God is doing in her life. Find yourself in the awe of the shepherds. Where are you in this sacred story of love that flows through each of us as we gather to celebrate on this Christmas Eve? I'd like to read the story from a little further back in the Gospel of Luke so that you might find yourself in these words.

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. An angel came to her and said, 'Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you.' But Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. So the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God and now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor, David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be? I am a virgin.' And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be holy. He will be called Son of God. And now, your relative, Elizabeth, in her old age has also conceived a son and this in this sixth month of her who was said to be barren. Nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary responded, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.*

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

*And then Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, he sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned to her home.*

*And then the passage for tonight. In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

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This is the story of the birth of Jesus, the Christ. This is the story of Christmas that we gather to celebrate this night. Do you find yourself in Mary who wonders what is going on, who slowly comes to realize that God is doing something profound in her life, that ultimately she is to birth forth the Christ Child? Maybe you find yourself in the persons of the angels, who consistently say, "Do not be afraid." Who offer greetings to those around them who are startled and unsure of why you would love them, why you would notice them, why you would even care. Or maybe this holy night you find yourself in the person of the Child, bound up and laid to rest in a manger where animals feed. Maybe you find yourself outcast and on the margins and wondering if God will notice you or care or love you or comfort you. This is the night that we celebrate that that child laid in the manger is the Savior, the Christ, and that for all of us who feel on the outside or who, like Mary, wonder if God is up to something strange, or who, like the angels, need to tell those around us to not be afraid. Wherever you find yourself this night, know that the birth of the Christ is the promise for all of us. It is, in fact, Good News for all people, especially us. Amen.