

**Concord Presbyterian Church
Scripture and Reflections
Christmas Eve Vigil
2011
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Isaiah 9: 2-7

9:2 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. 9:3 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. 9:4 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. 9:5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 9:6 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. 9:7 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.

In this reading Isaiah gifts us with a poem filled with powerful images. Darkness is a metaphor for depression and death, while light symbolizes life and joy. In the language of prayer the prophet sketches a scene of celebration such that we can almost see and hear the festivities. The people rejoice because they have been freed from oppression. Their celebration is warmed and illuminated by the fire that burns the instruments of war.

The central theme of the poem, and the sign of God's saving activity on behalf of the people is the birth of a child. This newborn baby—a crown prince—is shown to be a righteous and just king, sitting on the throne of David. He will administer justice, establish righteousness, and inaugurate a reign of peace. Because this king's rule is consistent with the will of God Isaiah sees it extending forever.

Of course Isaiah was speaking of the birth of a specific king in Judah. But on this holy night we Christians see the promise, hoped for by Isaiah, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. On this holy night God's will for justice, righteousness and peace is made flesh in the weakest of human creatures, a little baby. And on this holy night we can know with confidence that the darkness has been overcome, the instruments of war will be destroyed and there will be everlasting peace on earth. There is indeed cause for celebration!

Titus 2: 11-14

2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 2:12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 2:13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 2:14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

This reading from one of the so-called Pastoral Epistles faithfully proclaims what we celebrate tonight—that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all...” (verse 11). But it also acknowledges that we still wait for the full realization of the hoped-for kingdom—where war and violence of every kind, famine, hunger, disease, despair and death will be no more.

So while it is right and fitting that we celebrate, we should not, even tonight, forget that we are a nation at war, and that there are poor, hungry and suffering people in our world and in our neighborhoods. The writer of this letter to Titus reminds us that even though the kingdom of God is not yet fully realized we are to live as if it is.

The text tells us that, because of the one whose birth we celebrate, we are a redeemed and purified people who are to be zealous for good deeds. Rather than wringing our hands about the state of the world, we are to show the love modeled for us by Jesus Christ, and by so doing move the world closer to the promised kingdom. May it be so!

Luke 2:1-14

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2:2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 2:3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 2:4 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. 2:5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 2:6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 2:7 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. 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 2:9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 2:10 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: 2:11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 2:12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

What a night this is! Christmas Eve is a time of true Christmas magic and wonder. C.S. Lewis once observed that it's not just the candle glow and marvelous music. It is a recognition that the truth of the incarnation is an awesome mystery; the amazing fact that God dared to place eternity in the life of a squealing baby.

Each of us would do well to ask ourselves, “Why are we here tonight?” I pray that we will allow for the possibility that we are here to touch God’s mystery, to be lifted up from despair, to find a place in God’s world; to worship the God whose great love for us knows no limit.

I pray that we allow for the possibility that the Spirit of God that moves in all of us has drawn us to the true hope found in the birth of this Christ child.

I pray, also, that you look around you and see, not a mixture of Concord members, visitors, guests and strangers, but fellow seekers of the truth. We are brothers and sisters, all gathered together to give glory to God as God's children; as members of the extended family of Jesus Christ; whose birthday we celebrate.

Finally, I pray that the magic and mystery of this night takes up permanent residence in your soul; and sustains you with hope, joy, peace and love always.