

Sunday, December 24, 2017
 Nativity of Our Lord/Christmas Eve 7:00 PM

A Study in Contrasts

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church

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We can trace much of the history of the Christian experience through art. As we peer around this sanctuary we have representations of Scripture appearing in windows and paintings and images...colors and symbols that help to tell a story that began *once upon a midnight clear*.

Art has a power to help us see that which is otherwise unseen...it helps us to view the world through another eye...through another lens...through another time.

Art has a way to make time stand still and to allow us to gaze at a moment in time and space where all is *still...where all is silent...where all is calm*. Art has a way to help us glimpse at that *holy night when stars shone brightly* above the manger in Bethlehem.

Art, as music, holds that same power but it tantalize the senses...through sound...where sound can help us to slip into the story and literally *fall to our knees* as did those shepherds – or to feel the terror and fear when the angels broke into loud jubilant song in the skies over the fields...or, after a long journey from the East, to feel the relief of the magi when they finally opened their treasures chests to expose the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the king of kings and lord of lords.

One way to study art...to appreciate it, be it visual, auditory...culturally or through literature...is to study similarities and differences.

I'd like to talk a bit about the contrasts...a study in contrasts if you will.

A study in contrast would be looking at someone or something that contains traits that are not often found together...

And in Scripture, dare I say we have many studies in contrast.

In the Prophet Isaiah's poem of promises for deliverance from oppression we hear of a royal child that will be born to fulfill the promise of God...to defeat the oppression of this world and to once and for all deliver us from wandering in the darkness of injustice, prejudice, and death.

The prophet says:

“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.”

Light has shined.

And how could any of us deny the need to have the light of justice, equality, and life shine upon us...we pray to have the darkness cast away and to see a world filled with the beauty of the *diversity* of God – a world where the authority of God is the driving purpose of all people...as the prophet foretells of a time when the messiah of God comes that:

authority rests upon his shoulders;
 and he is named
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Where the peace is endless, and all is held up in justice and righteousness.

And yet, on the year when the so called Emperor demanded a registration for the purposes of conscription and his largest tax initiative for the economically powerful in a nation of injustice and occupation...we find a young woman with child...and her older husband...returning to the town in which his ancestry lines began...to be registered as if they were cattle.

Too burdened by the pressures of life, too poor to have made it into the Inn of *entitlement*, Joseph and Mary were pushed to the edges of town...to the margins of society...to the filth of a stable...to a place that smelled of animals...where modern *science-based* research and medical experts would say is unsuitable to deliver a child.

And yet, there...

And yet, there in the stable of unsavory conditions...Mary delivers this child...this child, flesh and blood like you and me...carried by this scared helpless mother who experienced the biological realities of pregnancy and bore God into this world...where God experienced our starts as a *fetus* and our own realities of birth into a world *vulnerable*...and yet...and yet somehow brought a great light to the nations...a light, according to the Gospel of John, “a light that shone in the darkness...and the darkness has not overcome it,” shall not overcome it and the darkness will never overcome it.

All this, God breaks through the heavens and enters our world in great poverty and disadvantage – with outcasts and the unimaginable – the King of kings and the Lord of Lords is brought into this world.

Could the contrast of great royalty and absolute poverty be any more clear?

A royal baby...Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...born in the filth of a stable...*vulnerable* and without power...not greeted by royal courtiers or kings and queens...but by outcasts and those on the very margins of their societal structures...the Shepherds.

But could these contrasts be the bedrock of a Christmas story that could literally change the world?

It is in the contrasts of the sanitary royal births and the gritty more real births that we witness something more miraculous and Holy.

In the art and music and songs of Christmas Time we share in the witness of the first visitors of the Christ child.

The bedrock of the Christmas story is found in these contrasts that somehow help us to see more clearly the world we live in today.

We are part of this study in contrasts...this Holy endeavor by God to bring salvation and peace to this world plagued with *evidence* denying structures that rob us of the peace we yearn for...this Holy endeavor calls to us to stand up and in one voice as loud as the angels' jubilant songs in the skies above the shepherds and say yes to God...yes to the offer and invitation to pick up the Holy responsibility to demand and live into a world capable of peace and love and compassion.

Once and for all prejudice, injustice and death will be swallowed up by the greatness of a God made flesh.

This is when together we say in one voice...yes...yes to God's invitation.

Our faith not just demands this yes...but it depends on this yes.

Luke tells us that:

“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.”

Do not be afraid...do not be afraid to say yes to God...to live into this Holy endeavor of God...to embrace the contrasts in our world and to fully live as the beloved creation God made you to be.

For when the angels left the Shepherds...they were bold enough to go to Bethlehem to see this promised messiah...this promise to them, the Shepherds. The ones living outside, on the margins and not nearly sanitized enough to be part of a Royal story.

But those outsiders and despised people of society did not just go to that lowly dirty stable...they went, they saw, and they spoke.

They spoke to others...they told the story of the angels that sang *“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill to all.”*

They went from that *Little Town of Bethlehem from the dark streets that shined with the everlasting light all the way to the mountains where they declared that on that night Jesus Christ was born.*

The hopes and fears of all the years were met there...that night...under the skies in a filthy manger with Shepherds and outcasts...

What would the art tell us today?

What would the picture look like today if the angels broke through the heavens and declared to us that in this day in the city of Wilmington, a Savior were born? What would that sign be for us?

I'm sure that we would not see the royal visitors - no, the paintings and songs would most likely have something to do with those that society has pushed off to filthy stable today...

The poor. The vulnerable members of our community...refugees, trans folks, people of color...those of us that do not fit the mold of a world of war and violence...the very ones that were and continue to be excluded by the churches across this world...

On this Holy night – whether stars shine brightly or not – we open our doors and lives and selves to this awesome power of God...we take this moment to allow ourselves to escape through the art of song, glass, scripture and images...to allow the power of God to help us see that which is otherwise unseen.

To allow time to stand still for a moment and to prepare ourselves to go, and like the Shepherds, tell others out there what had been made known to us about this child – glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen...

God is with you, God loves you as you are, you are enough for God and because of this I truly believe that we can in one loud voice cry out Merry Christmas and demand nothing less than peace on earth and goodwill to all...together let us say yes to God and yes to one another.

Amen and amen.