

Christmas Eve 2020
Rev. Shannon White
Wilton Presbyterian Church
December 24, 2020

Tonight, we return to the story of Jesus' birth as it is told in the Gospel of Luke. This account is the narrative we read again and again on this holy night, for this author gives us some of the most beloved loving detail of the characters in the story. Like you, I yearn to feel the nostalgic story... to see the scene play out, to hear the music of the angels, to feel the rush to the manger to see what this star that pierces the night sky has come to proclaim. We long to believe the Good News of the messengers that is the culmination of humanity's pain of birth: "do not be afraid, I am with you." Those words repeated from the beginning with the angel's words to Mary all the way through Jesus' life and even at his ascension following his death... telling his beloved followers to not be afraid... I am with you to the end of the age.

During this season, we have repeated the phrase, "Do Not Be Afraid" each week in our benediction... as an affirmation that the coming of God into our lives even in times as difficult as these can still be full of hope, joy, peace and love, for unto us a sign has come that will be to all people... "on earth, peace and good will to all."

Throughout this season, our choir has been singing a verse each week from the song Mark Miller wrote based on this poem:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining;
I believe in love even when feeling it not;
I believe in God even when he is silent.

The lyrics were found written on a wall somewhere in Cologne, Germany. Some sources say it was written on a cellar wall where Jews were hiding from the Gestapo... others say it was on a wall in a concentration camp.

The poem and song point to the hope and absolute need for God to enter into our world and our lives. It is a timeless need that rings true every year. This year, though, perhaps our spirits shout out for its message of hope and assurance more than ever. This season which culminates in this night... in the birth of an infant who came in human form to all of humanity... reminds us that the birth of Jesus was the moment when God pierced through the darkness of our world and came to us---to you and me--- in the depth of our human condition, in the midst of our ordinary lives.

We have wondered this year how we could possibly recreate a sense of normalcy in this moment. We wondered how we could get through it with the joy we usually feel on this night, having lost so much this year.

But if this year has taught us anything, it is that normal is fleeting. This year it is NOT the same. And we know... that BECAUSE of the people we have lost, the illnesses we have faced, the jobs and security we have lost, that it will likely not ever be the same. Surely every year, we will remember this moment when we thought perhaps light and song would elude us. But here we are. We will light our lights and we will have our song---even as our human family has not been able to gather.

But on this night, with all of the externals stripped away, perhaps this is an opportunity to experience the miracle of this night anew... THAT night in Bethlehem showed us so long ago that it was NOT about where they celebrated... but WHY they celebrated. Jesus did not need to be born in a fancy place with loud trumpets and big choirs dressed in robes and people dressed in fancy clothes... Jesus was born in the most humble of places... in a simple gathering of a family, connected by love. And... Jesus is born in and among US. We are the manger into which Jesus was born... and because of his presence in our world and in us, we get to be bearers of the light and co-creators of God's vision~~ God's promises come again

and again: hope as we help create a better tomorrow, love that works through us for a more just world, joy that wells from a place deep within us and overflows, and peace that offers us the assurance we all need.

Our country has been divided on many things. We are devastated by our losses. We are tired and perhaps we are not so calm. But for this moment, this night, let us remember that we are not alone, and we will NEVER be alone, for we celebrate Emmanuel, God-with-us... and that changes everything.

In just a moment we will hear one of the most beloved songs of this night... "*O Holy Night*," which will be sung by Sarah Pfisterer and Rick Hilsabeck.

In this bleak time, may this be a holy night, not because of all of the external things, but because of what God has done in YOU and in US. May God's light and presence shine forth as we walk together into a new day!