

December 24th, 2022

Year A; Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Psalm 96: 1-8

Luke 2: 1-14

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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 he favors!"*

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Merry Christmas!

Our readings tonight are bathed in light, beginning with our opening collect, which offers, especially on such a cold night as this, the inviting and warm phrase: *“O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light.....”*

And our passage from Isaiah, immersed in the language of darkness and light:

“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.”

And in the words of the gospel of Luke, we move from the soft light of the manger, into the heavenly light that the shepherds encountered.

The shepherds, so used to the dark of night, watching over their sleeping sheep, drowsing themselves in the night, lit only by the stars. And suddenly, an angel stood before them, *“...and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”*

And in their terror, unsure of what and who this angel is, the angel’s first words assure them: *“Do not be afraid”*.

Of course, those words often spoken in the Christmas story, from an angel to the shepherds, to Mary, to Joseph, did not magically erase all their fear, as is true for us too.

“Do not be afraid”, is less magic and more dispelling yes, the darkness, the darkness that comes when we are afraid, the darkness that isolates us, the darkness that haunts us, the darkness that draws us away. Do not be afraid, says I walk with you, God walks with you, you are not alone.

So, we are called on this holy night to share God’s light in a world that walks so often in darkness, and that so often needs to hear those words: “Do not be afraid.”

A story from a dear friend and part-time parishioner of Trinity, Cheri Sheridan, has been repeating in my head since Thanksgiving.

Cheri came to Trinity after seeing our sign saying, “the little church with the big heart”. She and her therapy dog Bunsen came to church and Bunsen immediately demonstrated his amazing skills, including being able to sit in a church pew, despite being a good-sized black Labrador retriever.

Awhile back Cheri and her family connected with some young folks from Ukraine who came to the United States. This young couple, Yehor and Vika, sought asylum in the US after the 2014 invasion of Crimea by Russia.

Yehor and Vika found freedom and hope in the US, but knew that they might never be able to see their families again.

Then came the invasion of Ukraine by Russia last February. We all have seen frequent images these days of Ukrainians struggling in their deep midwinter, with only a few hours of electricity and heat daily, with food scarce, homes destroyed, and missiles frequent.

And Yehor worried for the safety of his family and with the help of Cheri and her husband Joe, began the process to help his grandmother, mother, and little brother come to the US under the United for Ukraine program.

And just after Thanksgiving, Yehor's family started a 50-hour trip on buses and airplanes, covering 5500 miles, from the Dnipro River Valley in Ukraine, to Kiev, to Warsaw, Poland to Copenhagen and finally to Dulles Airport outside Washington DC. And finally, Yehor seeing and embracing his family again after eight long years.

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In a few minutes, after communion, we will lower the lights in the church, and I will come forward and light a single candle from our Advent wreath, the place we have heard prayers for hope, peace, joy, and love in our shadowy world.

I will then light the candles of those sitting up front and offer the words of the angel to each person, do not be afraid. The front row folks will then light the candles of those close to them with those same words, and onward we will share that one lit candle, and the words of comfort that can dispel the darkness, do not be afraid.

Several months ago, I quoted words from The Talmud, the ancient books of Jewish theology and wisdom that again offers guidance in a world still so shadowed, we might despair as to where our one candle could offer enough light, where our whispered words could drive away fear.

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

So, on this most holy night we do not abandon the work and we offer what we can, light and hope, one candle and do not be afraid.

Amen.