

Christmas Eve 2023

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, this Holy night we sing together with the angels to celebrate the glory of the Savior's birth. May this love, may this most precious Good News deepen our faith and bring peace to our world. This we ask in the Name of Jesus, our savior and friend. Amen.

This Christmas Eve, with war in the Holy Land, there are no celebrations in Bethlehem. The pastor of the Christmas Church, a Lutheran Church in Bethlehem has put in a creche and in it Jesus and the Holy Family are surrounded by the broken concrete blocks and bricks that symbolize Gaza. As the Rev. Munther Isaac told a reporter, "God is under the rubble in Gaza, this is where we find God right now." The terrible scenes we have witnessed for the past two and a half months, the Hamas attack on Israel, hunting down women, children, men on the kibbutzim, at a music festival, the indiscriminate killing and taking dozens and dozens of innocent civilians hostage, and then the subsequent Israeli counter attacks, destroying the greater part of Gaza, the death toll now standing at 20,000, one percent of the population and almost three quarters of those are children and women. It is indeed difficult to think of a Christmas Eve celebration with this backdrop.

But even that first Christmas Eve more than two thousand years ago was fraught, a difficult time for most and for Joseph and his young wife, there was no room at the inn during their travels; so Mary gives birth in the stable surrounded by the animals. We know the story well, the Good News given to the shepherds in the fields, that the long awaited promise of a savior for the people was now happening! Those words of the prophet Isaiah were being fulfilled: "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 as Isaiah calls forth, there is joy, deep and abiding joy as God's promised kingdom of peace and justice in now come into the world.

We too, you and me, my beloved friends, we too gather this night with the same difficulties we all face, but also as those called to hear this word of God's promise and a call to rejoice in the Good News God brings to us once more. That seeming contradiction, with the troubles and difficulties of our world, the issues in our own lives, yet also this annual celebration of joy amidst the sorrow, a seeming contradiction that pushes us deeper to reflect on what we are doing here this evening? Yes, we could simply agree with the so called "realists" of this world and admit the hopelessness of a world at war, filled with disasters, diseases and destruction. But this Christmas Eve, even in the midst of the darkness, we

are called to open the eyes of our faith to see a light coming into our world. A few days ago, on the eve of the Winter solstice, the longest night of the year, a couple dozen Barre residents, including half a dozen from Good Shepherd, we gathered in City Park to remember our homeless neighbors, the difficulties they face each night, and to hold a sacred space for those who have died. When I told our Barre City Clerk, Carol Dawes, about the plans for this vigil, she said, "And after the longest night, we will celebrate the coming of the light." I greatly appreciate that sentiment, and it helped me to realize that we are the true realists, looking for that light in our world, that light that comes to us this night, just as the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds as the angels brought to them the Good News of great joy. Yes, this is the light we look for, coming into our world, the newborn savior Jesus. This light may seem to flicker, may even seem in danger of being overwhelmed by the darkness, but to our eyes, opened in faith, that light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

So this night, here in the cold dusk, we give thanks for the gift of light in our lives, the gift of light in the life of our world. We give thanks that the almighty power of God's never failing love has come to us, born a new as a Holy child, lifting us and all creation to God's glory. As we give thanks, we will dim the lights of the sanctuary and each take a candle as we sing the carol, "Silent Night." That light symbolizes the love of God given to us this night at the birth of Jesus. That light, candle by candle, will overcome the darkness as the love of God bears us up in the difficulties which surround us. This light, candle by candle, enables us to sing along with the angelic host: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth and goodwill to all!" My friends in Christ, the blessing of this Holy Night be with you and those you hold dear, and yes, Merry Christmas one and all! Amen.