

Worship at home

Christmas Eve, 2020



<https://stushieart.com/tag/christmas-eve-clip-art/>

Hymn #159 “Oh come, all ye faithful”

Sanctuary choir, First Methodist Houston:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sfgTBJQUo>

Lighting the Christ candle:

Behold, I bring you good news of great joy; for to you is born in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord!

Jesus has arrived in grace and mystery, renewing faded hopes and announcing peace to a weary world.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favours!

Jesus comes among us in power and glory, inspiring joy and calling us to lives that are full of God’s love.

Jesus, the light of the world, is born.

Let Christ’s light shine in the darkest corners of our lives. Let Christ’s light shine in the darkest corners of our world.

God is with us.

Let Christ’s light shine.

The Christ candle is lit.

“O God Most High,
who by the incarnation of thy dear Son hast revealed
thy perfect love toward the whole world:
We adore thee and give thanks.
With wonder and gladness we approach the joyous mystery of that holy Birth foretold
by the angels.
Our hearts turn to Bethlehem and to the Child whom the shepherds found cradled in
a manger.
Let our eyes truly behold thy salvation;
let the Spirit of Christ thus born purify us from all evil,
and cause us to be at peace with thee,
and with ourselves,
and with the whole fellowship of humankind.
Glory be to thee, O God Most High.
Amen.”¹

Hymn #166 “Once in royal David’s city”

Choir of King’s College, Cambridge:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMGMV-fujUY>

Reading: Luke 2:1-20

¹ *Book of Common Order of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*, 1964. pg. 263.

Sermon:

Christmas Eve, 2020. When I began to write this sermon, I thought about starting with a statement about how seminary never prepared me to deliver a Christmas Eve sermon on the cusp of a pandemic-caused lockdown. However, I then began to realize that even though this may be true in as much as “Preaching in a Pandemic” was not a course my college offered; nevertheless, the Word of God, and the faith that is nurtured by our response to the Word of God, does prepare us for such a crisis.

There is a preface I use in almost every funeral service before reading scripture:

The Christian church finds comfort and instruction in the words of Scripture. Written over many centuries, these words express the faith of men and women who came to a profound understanding of God in the midst of suffering and hardship.

Many if not most of the writings in the Bible were written in the midst of some crisis – whether it be global, national, or personal. And the church has preserved these words and experiences to encourage and sustain each new generation to faith in the midst of troubles.

One thousand years before the event we celebrate tonight, Yahweh (which is the name by which the Living God revealed himself) made a promise to the then king, David, that He would look after David and David’s descendants forever. Yahweh would protect and care for all those who lived within the empire that David was building and would hand on to his children for generations to follow. Under Yahweh’s care, David’s kingdom would never collapse.

For a number of years that seemed to be the case. Under David’s reign, the twelve tribes of Israel prospered as one united kingdom. David reigned for 40 years until Solomon took the throne as king of a united and God-protected kingdom. Like his father before him, Solomon reigned 40 years. However, by the end of that time, cracks were beginning to show in the system. At the end of Solomon’s reign, less than 100 years after David took the throne, the great God-experiment seemed to be failing as 10 of the tribes broke away leaving only two of the smallest ones – Judah and Benjamin – loyal to David. This was a national crisis. Two hundred years later, the 10 northern tribes (which are collectively known as “Israel”) succumbed to the expanding Assyrian empire. And, about 130 years after that, the southern tribes fell to the expanding Babylonian empire. And fell spectacularly. The holy city of Jerusalem complete with its temple, which symbolized the presence of Yahweh among his people, was destroyed. Burned to the ground. This was a crisis of epic proportions.

If you've been keeping track, we've covered just over 400 years of history. That is a long time, but it's not forever as was promised. 400 years after God's great promise to David there was nothing left of the God-kingdom.

In time some of the people returned to Jerusalem. And, the temple was rebuilt (to be destroyed once more and forever 40 years after Jesus' resurrection.) But the great dynasty of David would never again be restored.

It seemed as though God's experiment had failed.

God's people were scattered and for hundreds of years to follow lived under the control of first one, then another empire that had no interest in placing Yahweh in the center of the people's lives.

And yet, there remained a significant population who, in the midst of this national and personal crisis, worshiped Yahweh as though Yahweh was right there with them. Who prayed as though Yahweh could hear and would respond. Who studied His Word as though it was something that could be trusted. There were priests like Zechariah who, day after day, generation after generation lit the incense in the temple believing that just as the smoke filled the room, God was somehow there. There were mothers like Elizabeth, who recognized in the birth of a child the presence of the Holy Spirit. There were men like Joseph who were willing to risk their reputation, their employability, their friends and connections over something told to them by an angel. And there were women like Mary who were willing to ponder the paradox of the promises of faith and the realities of daily living and then come before this God and say: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word" trusting that God would supply them with the strength and wisdom needed to do the work. Even if that meant there were no midwives, no help, no room in the inn. Even if that meant that she had to give birth, wrap the babe in bands of cloth, and lay him down to sleep herself.

It seemed as though God's great experiment had failed. And yet there remained a few saints whose faith was formed in the midst of the crisis and thus formed sustained them to work God's plan of bringing his good news to all people.

And one day, in the town of Nazareth in the province of Galilee – once the region occupied by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, now under the control of the Roman empire – an angel announced to Mary that she would give birth to a son who would be the Son of God – not in the metaphorical sense as Israel referred to itself, but in the literal sense. He would be great. And he would sit on the throne of his ancestor David. What makes this announcement all the more awe-some is that these words are

almost the exact words Yahweh used when making his promise to David so many years before. In 2nd Samuel 7:9ff. we read of Yahweh speaking to David:

...I will make for you a *great* name, ... I will raise up *your offspring* after you, ... I will establish the throne of his kingdom *forever*. *I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me*.... your throne shall be established forever.

This child who Mary bore is the living proof that God's experiment had not failed.

No wonder the shepherds *ran* to Bethlehem, overcome by the joy that is relief. With the angel's message came the assurance that their faith was legitimate! Everything they'd been praying about was happening! All the songs of the shepherd-king David were based in a heavenly and earthly reality! This child was proof that God's words were trustworthy.

From within the human conception of time it must have seemed barely imaginable – it had been a thousand years since Yahweh first called out David, and nearly 600 since the last spark of the Davidic monarchy was snuffed out. Yet, into a world of empire building, head counting, economic disparity, fear, doubt, and disease a child was born; a Saviour, the Messiah,..., the Lord.

The Gospel of Luke, as was much of the New Testament, was written in Greek and the Greek word for "Lord" is *kyrios*. What's noteworthy about that is that this is the same word which the Greek Old Testament (with which Luke would have been familiar) used to translate the name of God: Yahweh. "To you is born in the city of the ancient King whose kingdom everybody assumed was long gone, a Saviour, someone anointed by the Living God himself, even more: someone who *is* the living God. Yahweh, Kyrios, Lord has been born among us.

The kingdom continues.

A pandemic may force us to take shelter behind the closed doors of our homes. Empires may vie for world power.

Our emotional landscapes may leave us in a state of near-constant turmoil.

In the moment, it may seem as though God's great kingdom experiment has failed.

As though peace on earth is nothing more than a nice song we sing once a year.

But for those who can hear with the ears of faith, the angels' song is still ringing amidst the cacophony of COVID numbers and politics:

"To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord... Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours."

It's worth remembering that Joseph, through whom Jesus got his Davidic ancestry, was Jesus' *adopted* father. The company of those "whom he favours" extends beyond tribe and kin. Jesus has brought the kingdom to bear on earth as it is in the highest heaven, and the kingdom is open to those who, like David long ago, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, like Joseph and Mary, and like Jesus himself, choose to put the Lord, Yahweh, center in their lives. By our faith in Jesus, who Mary bore into the world alone by her strength and faith, we too are adopted into this ancient and forever kingdom.

Christmas Day marks the beginning of the Christmas season which lasts until Epiphany on January 6th (hence, the "Twelve days of Christmas"). My prayer throughout this season as we enter lockdown is that we will each rest in the faith Christ gives by his Spirit through his Word and thus encounter in different ways the peace of Christ of which the angels sang. To that end, I'd like to offer a prayer which you are free to use as you see fit:

*By the devotion of David, your shepherd king,
by the yielding strength of Mary,
by the compassionate understanding of Joseph,
by the thoughtful silence of Zechariah,
by the grateful joy of Elizabeth,
by the songs of the angels,
by the praise of the shepherds,
by our imitation of these, your saints;
Word become flesh,
 dwell with us.
Messiah, Lord,
 open us to your kingdom.
Saviour, born in David's city,
 renew in us the joy of your salvation,
 and grant us peace.²*

In the name of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Amen.

Hymn #164 "O little town of Bethlehem"

Gaither Vocal Band: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwfkGj51S2c>

² Inspired by David Adam, *The Rhythm of Life*, 52.

Prayers:

Child of light, Saviour of all,
We thank you that you come to us,
seeking to enter our lives.
Child of Mary, help us to welcome you.

We thank you that you come to us,
bringing love into our aching world.
Child of Joseph, may we love you as you love us.

We thank you that you come to us
no matter where we are or what we do.
Child of the Shepherds, help us to realize you are always near.

We thank you that you come to us,
showing us a different way of living.
Child of the magi, may we follow you
no matter how hard or narrow the way becomes.

God of all mercy and tenderness,
Child of the angels,
may we sing your praise.
Crown our celebrations this Christmastide
and bless our gatherings, whether in person or at a distance.
Help us know you are near. Amen.³

Hymn #154 “Silent night”

Choir of King’s College, Cambridge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n036kBC1HEw>

Benediction:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

³ Worship resource for Christmas Eve/Day, 2020 from <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>