

Mooretown Presbyterian Churches
December 24, 2022
Christmas Eve

Hymn : #159 "Oh come, all ye faithful"

Reading: Isaiah 9:1-7

Choir: "A special night" ~ Don Besig

Advent reading and candle lighting (*Insert*):

Song:

**We honour Messiah with Christ's candle flame:
our Christmas Eve candles, glad tidings proclaim.
O come, all you faithful, rejoice in this night,
as God comes among us, the Christian's true light.**

Prayers of adoration and supplication:

God of mystery and wonder,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

ever three, yet ever one.

On this holy night, the angels sing your praises with great joy.

The shepherds welcome your saving love, born in a manger.

Mary and Joseph ponder your promise, cradled in their arms.

Glory to you, O God, for such gifts entrusted to us in Christ Jesus!

And so, we come to praise you,

singing with the angels,

amazed like the shepherds,

cradling the Christ Child in our hearts once again.

Glory to you, O God, Source of Light, Life, and Love for all people.

Prayer of confession (*said in unison*):

God of grace and mercy,

you have given us the greatest gift of all, your Son Jesus,

but we confess the pressure to give the perfect gift distracts us.

Jesus was born in human flesh,

but we fail to see the dignity in the human lives around us.

Forgive us, O God,

and help us cherish the true meaning of all you offer us

each and every day

in the child in the manger.

Assurance of God's mercy:

The angel of the Lord assured Joseph he should take Mary as his wife, because her son, to be called Jesus, would save God's people from their sins. This night, receive the gift of God's forgiveness, offered in Christ Jesus. Know this gift is for you and share it with others in Jesus' name.

Hymn: #165 "O little town of Bethlehem"

Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Hymn: #147 “Angels we have heard on high”

Sermon:

The Saviour is born

1. Emperor Augustus was revered by many as the greatest of the Roman emperors.

His real name was Octavian, yet, such was the reverence in which he was held that the Roman Senate bestowed upon him his title: Augustus, which means “exalted”

Emperor Augustus was in power from 31 B.C. – 14 A.D.. During his reign, he accomplished much: ended the civil wars that had previously plagued the empire, he expanded the empire’s borders, rebuilt the city of Rome including the many temples to the Roman gods, secured reliable water and food sources, established permanent fire brigades and police forces, built roads, and ushered in what some considered to be a golden age of Roman literature and architecture. In addition, he orchestrated the Roman Peace, or, *Pax Romana*.

Many hailed him as the lord and saviour of Rome and the world.

Under the Roman Peace, Jews didn’t have to serve in the military and were allowed relative freedom. As long as they also obeyed the Roman laws and paid the Roman taxes, they were free to enforce their own laws, to worship their way, to sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple – many scholars think that the shepherds to whom the angels appeared were in fact temple shepherds, and the sheep they tended were set aside for the sacrifices by which the people of God were assured of their right standing before God.

This was, for the Roman empire, an era of relative peace and thriving culture.

Of course, all of this infrastructure – not to mention the army by which he enforced the *pax romana* – required cash which was, then, as now, generated through taxes. To know who to tax, and who was available to serve in the military, the government needed to know how many people lived within its realm. So, periodically, the citizens of the empire would have to register in a census.

So, Joseph and Mary travelled to Joseph’s ancestral hometown of Bethlehem to be registered. There Mary “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.”

2. By the way he's recorded the story, the gospel writer Luke has set up a remarkable contrast.

On the one side is the exalted emperor, hailed as lord and saviour and rebuilder of the temples to the Roman gods; on the other is a baby born to a young woman still in her virginity and her espoused carpenter-husband. A baby born to nobodies, laid in the animals' feed trough.

It's this baby to whom the angel referred when he appeared to the shepherds saying:

... to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

The angel didn't say that another emperor was born,
nor a teacher of law and ethics,
nor an exemplar of morality,
nor a healer,
nor a faith leader,
nor a revolutionary.

His ministry would include all of these and more, but that's not what the human race needs as of first importance. We have lots of teachers of law and ethics, yet we still struggle. We have lots of exemplars of morality, yet we still struggle. We have lots of healers, yet we're still under the threat of illness and brokenness – whether physical, mental, or emotional. And, we have plenty of revolutionaries and would-be emperors, yet the new world orders have yet to establish the hoped-for peace on earth!

*To you is born this day in the city of David a **Saviour**...*

Any sense of peace we try to create will be an imperfect peace and doomed to degrade into some form of chaos as long as we remain out of sync with the Source of Life itself.

The fourth-century theologian St. Augustine is credited with the quote:

Thou hast made me for thyself, O Lord, and my heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.

Human beings are created to live harmoniously with one another, and with the plants and animals, with the sea and the sky and the cosmos. Yet, all of these secondary relationships are rooted in a harmonious relationship with the Living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As long as we remain in disharmony with our Creator, we will only contribute to the general restlessness of our societies.

This disharmony is the product of what the Bible calls *sin*: a state of exalting one's self to the position of god and thus of pretending we don't need God.

The ripple-effect of sin is disharmony in our inner selves, in our relationships, in society, and in creation itself.

No emperor – no matter how exalted their peers may esteem them to be – has yet been able to overcome that universal affliction and create peace on earth.

We don't need another emperor; we don't need another teacher of morality and ethics – we've got lots of those! We need a Saviour. A rescuer.

3. Under the shadow of the empire, under the shadow of humanity's imperfect attempts to create peace, Jesus was born of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit.

At the same time both human and divine, he bridges the gap that no emperor nor human-devised system can.

Jesus has come to save.

Although he does teach morality and ethics, although he does heal (and continues to do so through the ministry of his church), although he has established a new world order: the kingdom of heaven on earth, he came to save. He came to be the sacrifice which all the sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple foreshadowed, he came to deal with human sin and reconciles us – reharmonizes us – with the heavenly Father as all the sacrifices of the sheep the shepherds tended foreshadowed. He came to be the bread of life suggested by his manger-shaped altar in the city whose name means “house of bread”. He came, the Messiah, the anointed king, who would establish and uphold the throne of David and his kingdom by which there shall be peace. Not the temporary and militaristically enforced Roman Peace, but the endless and grace-given Peace of Christ.

*...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.*

4. When God sends His angel to relay a message, He will remain true to His Word!

Which means, that with the birth of Jesus and through His sacrificial death, sin is forgiven, death and the devil have lost the authority to control our thoughts, emotions, and actions.

The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light!

When we can grasp this good news by faith, from our reconciled fellowship with the heavenly Father, we can face all of the joys and sorrows of this present age without fear and we can know the peace of Christ in our souls, thus in our relationships, and in our societies.

So, for the sake of our societies, for the health of our souls, and for the glory of God, let us, with Mary, treasure the words of Luke's testimony and ponder the events of this night in our hearts. Amen.

Choir: "That first Nowell" ~ Nancy Price and Don Besig

Offering:

(Offering plates are presented at the Communion Table while congregation sings)

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
praise him all creatures here below;
praise him above, ye heavenly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.**

Prayer of dedication:

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession:

O God in whom we live and move and have our being,
We give you thanks that your love took flesh in the Christ child
and that his story still fills us with wonder.
With all the to-ing and fro-ing between family and friends this season,
we remember Mary and Joseph and their journey
in the midst of another busy time.
Watch over all who travel at this time of year,
for happy reasons or in the face of difficulties.
May they find your peace in the midst of their journeys.

As we remember the innkeeper who found space for Mary and Joseph,
we are grateful for the spaces we call home,
whether simple or sophisticated.
We pray for all those who are homeless,
and those who seek a welcome in strange places.
May they find an open door and kindness within.

As we remember the shepherds watching over their flocks,
we give you thanks for those who watch over us this night.
We pray for all those who must work on holidays,
tending the well-being of others.
May they know a blessing in the services they provide
and our gratitude for their efforts.

As we remember the angels and their message of peace and goodwill,
we are grateful for peace and order in our communities.
We pray for all those who work to establish and maintain peace
in troubled places and troubled lives,
knowing trouble rarely takes a vacation.

Hear these prayers and all the silent prayers of our hearts, O God,
and cradle them and us in your holy wisdom,
as we offer the prayer Jesus taught his friends and followers:

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: #154 "Silent Night"

Benediction:

Choir: "A Christmas Wish"