

November 28, 2021 Christmas Is About Hope Pt. 1 Joel 3:4-16, Matthew 1:23

The first Sunday in Advent! I realize there are 24 hours in a day, and 7 days in a week, but every year this season feels like it comes upon me, and upon us, suddenly. It cannot be the case. Time is time. The days unfold one at a time. And yet here I am trying once again to drink in the meaning of the season, while there is work to be done. Things to do. A lot of things to do! And suddenly...yes...suddenly, I am digging through the carefully stacked pile of Christmas decorations, to find the Nativity Set.

For me, the place to start in this most wonderful of seasons, is always the words of the prophets. So much of what we read in the books of prophecy is about bad times, difficult times, hard times. And recently Canadians have tasted their share of difficult times: a pandemic that is still upon us. The floods in B.C. The storms in the Atlantic regions. Are we not wondering what will happen next?

The thing is, as the prophets describe bad times, hard times, times of war and times of slavery, they always come back to this: "the Lord will be a refuge for HIS people, a stronghold for the people of Israel." It is a prophecy of hope. And the reason there is hope, and especially hope at this time of the year, is because the Lord is a refuge for HIS people."(Joel 3:16) People who believe. People like you. And me. The Advent season is not just a celebration. It is and I say thank God it is!

But it's also a season of remembering the past. God is involved with us, and in us, and in the times in which we are living. Christmas is about hope, because God is with us and among us.

I lit the candle of prophecy. I read to you the promise in that 16th verse of Joel chapter 3. The prophet foretold that the Lord is a stronghold for the people of Israel, the people who believe in the God who delivers and saves. People who have seen the waters part that they could escape their enemies on dry ground. People who, as they climbed up from the naked sea bed, saw the waters rushing back into place, sweeping away the armed forces of Egypt who were pursuing them, to kill them. Christmas is about hope because it is a matter of history. God saves HIS people. All of HIS people.

Martin Luther, that leading figure in the Protestant Reformation, wrote Hymns, sacred songs, set to the melodies they were singing at his favorite pubs. One of them, not a Christmas carol, A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing, protecting us with staff and rod, power all prevailing. What if the nations rage, and surging seas rampage? What though the mountains fall? The Lord is God of all. The Lord of hosts is with us." Luther was writing about God being a stronghold for HIS people. Why? Because he had emerged from the dark night of the soul. He had felt utterly lost. And what changed? He discovered the secret of hope. Belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Forgiveness given by God as the ultimate gift. The promise of eternal life. God saves people like us!

Why is Christmas about hope? Because it is about God's saving us. Matthew has given us the list of the people who were part of the coming of Jesus. The list included Rahab of Jericho. And having given us that amazing list, in verse 23 of what we call Matthew chapter 1, the disciple of Jesus sets the stage for everything he is going to tell us about Jesus and his ministry. Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah, chapter 7:14. "The Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." And Matthew explains that last word, Immanuel means "God with us" in Hebrew.

What was it the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans "if God be for us, who can be against us?" If God is with us (Immanuel) who can be against us? You see Christmas is about hope, because it is about God caring about us enough to send HIS son, Jesus, into the world to redeem it. This is not just about doctrine. Not just about Biblical doctrine. These are facts of history. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Jesus lived and grew up in Nazareth. Jesus ministered to crowds of people in Galilee. He healed. He taught. He called people to follow him and they responded in such numbers, the religious establishment became so concerned, they conspired and manipulated the Romans to destroy HIM.

And it did not work. O yes, Jesus died on the cross on Calvary's hill. HE was dead and HE was buried. But on the 3rd day, in the morning, HE rose. Before the day was out the disciples, who did not believe it was possible, saw HIM. He

invited Thomas a week later to touch the wounds made by the nails, the spear that tore open his side. They, the disciples were not changed and galvanized to spend their lives sharing the story of Jesus, unto their own deaths, because they invented parts of the story. Rather it was that they could no longer deny the truth. What they had seen and what they had heard HIM say.

To John Jesus had said, my mother is now your mother. Take care of her for me. To Peter HE said, Do you love me? When Peter said, yes of course I do, Jesus said, Well then, feed my sheep. Christmas is about hope. Because it is about God. Because it is about God being Jesus in the flesh and blood of a man. And the story of Jesus begins in real time, in the real world, where there are villains like Herod, and people with considerable power like Caesar Augustus. The story of Jesus begins to unfold in real time, in the world, at Christmas.

I hope you remember what the name Jesus means. It is in the notes at the bottom of the page on which you find Matthew 1:23. Jesus is the Greek form, of the name Joshua. The Hebrew is Yeshua. It means, "the Lord saves." Christmas is about hope, because Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and that is what we are celebrating on December 25th. The Lord Saves, was born of Mary, and grew to be the man who healed and taught and died and rose from the dead. His life was a miracle. Is a miracle. And will be miraculous. Which is just another way of saying, HE saves us in the power and grace of God because that is who HE is.

And what are we to say about the Church? Well if you mean the organization, this is what I say about the Church. It celebrates Jesus, although sometimes it fails to honour HIM. Because every person who is part of the Church top to bottom, people in the pulpits, people in the pew, are sinners, saved by grace, and in spite of that we still sin and need the cleansing that only Jesus can bestow. But HE does bestow grace and salvation to sinners like you and me. HE does. You can literally see that when we are generous to the have-nots of our society, when we visit the sick and shut in of our community, when we pray for them, and some of them are healed. When we pray for them and some of them pass away and leave us legacies of memories that move us, and remind us, that people who are facing their mortality often find in the good shepherd, Jesus, that God is with us, to save us, even as we face the ending of our days on earth.

Christmas is about hope. Why? Because it is about Jesus who is the Christ. If you don't believe me, look it up in the Oxford Dictionary. Here is what it says. "Christmas: festival of Christ's birth, celebrated December 25th, and devoted especially to family reunion and merry making." While I was at it, I looked up Christ in the Oxford Dictionary too. "Christ: Messiah or Lord's anointed of Jewish prophecy; (title, now treated as name given to) Jesus fulfilling this prophecy." The facts are very simple. Christmas is about hope.

Let us pray.

Lord God of heaven and all that is, be with us as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. Be with us as we decorate our homes and prepare the foods we enjoy in this special season. Grant us the gift of hope, even as we remember YOU, Lord and God, are the ONE for whom we decorate, and because of whom we make merry. Fill our throats with sacred song, the hymns and carols that remind us of the Biblical details that surrounded YOUR birth, life, and ministry among us. In this season, so undeniably meaningful, we want to give YOU the honour, the glory and the praise. YOU save us. Thank you. Amen