

**Christmas Eve 12/24/15**

**Combined Sermon Diana Pelletier, Faith Formation Facilitator and Rev. Gary Ferner**

### **HOPE DIANA**

Our story, our Christmas story, begins with HOPE and a young peasant girl, a nobody from nowhere special, chosen by God to bring hope, peace, love and joy into the world in a new way.

Mary was from the small town of Nazareth, a suburb of the wealthy Roman city of Sepphoris. A place built up around a natural water supply, where people lived in caves, both natural and man-made, that would protect them from the elements and provide cooling in the heat of summer.

Mary was living a simple, humble life when an angel of God appeared and shook her reality by telling her she was chosen by God to bear God son to the world. I imagine Mary feeling excited yet scared when accepting God's charge. I imagine Mary feeling faithful yet hopeless. After all, in her day to be an unwed pregnant girl was punishable by death!

Joseph's fiancé is pregnant and the child is not his. We can imagine Joseph would have felt angry, hurt and maybe hopeless. Joseph, however, finds hope when an angel comes to him in a dream and tells him that he has been chosen to be the earthly father of the Son of God.

Mary finds hope after taking a week long journey by foot to visit her cousin Elizabeth who has become pregnant in her old age. Finally able to talk to someone openly about her pregnancy, Mary can confide in, and learn from, Elizabeth and gain strength and faith in experiencing Elizabeth's excitement.

Mary and Joseph were chosen by God and were filled with mixed emotions.

### **HOPE GARY**

If we're waiting for the Hope of Jesus the Christ to arrive again this year to help us with the ills of the world, we may be misunderstanding the Christ Child's role in today's world! Jesus can't help us bring hope into this world, *we will be* the hope in this world.

In remembering his birth, in celebrating what his place in our lives means, we are more hopeful, but when the clock strikes midnight tonight, and we move from Christmas Eve to Christmas, we won't be getting a delivery of **Hope** from UPS, or FedEx, or the United States Postal Service.

So while we celebrate the historical baby Jesus, born to Mary and Joseph, the arrival of the Messiah, the Savior, and while we remember the hope he represented to those who ached for it, it is now up to us to provide the hope he brought, and share it throughout the world.

We will have to be hope for the hopeless. Which means being in touch with the hopeless in whatever ways can be helpful...providing clothes and housing for those without, providing food and comfort for those without.

The sharing of the gift of **Hope** at Christmas is just one of the 4 most important gifts we can share with each other and with those around us. We all have it in us, it's just that we sometimes neglect to share it with others. We are the Hope of the Season.

## **PEACE DIANA**

The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have taken Mary and Joseph approximately 8-10 days traveling on foot. Mary was nine months pregnant by the time the decree came for everyone to return to their home towns for the census. The couple most likely traveled as part of a caravan for safety, stopping in towns with watering holes to camp out each night.

The last days of the journey would have been the hardest for that is when they would have been traveling through the wilderness. The wilderness near Bethlehem is not what we would expect a wilderness to be, filled with trees and a soft carpet of pine needles, but rather the wilderness Mary and Joseph had to travel was a hilly desert that would no doubt be hot and very difficult to cross. I can imagine Mary breaking down in tears, tired and sore from riding on a donkey for over a week, and relenting that she could not go any further. Perhaps even asking God, "Why me?"

The Peace of God would come to Mary and Joseph as they traveled in the reminder of the call they had been given by God to bring God's peace into the world in the form of the baby Mary carried through this long and arduous journey. This journey for Mary and Joseph was not an expected journey, it was not an easy journey and it was certainly not a journey they asked for, but it was one they claimed as their own to fulfill God's call.

## **PEACE GARY**

Where can we find Peace these days? Where is it? What is it? With violence and anger lurking everywhere, it's nearly impossible to sneak off and find a moment of Peace. Sure, there will be some moments tonight where if we were to step outside, all will be calm. But for some families in Camillus, or Syracuse, or New York, or the US, or the world, tonight will be anything but peaceful.

Bombs and bullets, taunts and terror, these things plague us in every corner of the world. *We will need to be the peace we want to see in the world.* Cease fires end, peace agreements negotiated in bad faith fail, so it's going to have to be up to you and me to make peace. It starts in our own hearts, it moves to our own families and friends, and, if we share it right, those who receive it will share the peace in the wider circles of their lives. We need to be encouraging everyone we know, and even those we don't know to practice Peace in their lives.

Leading by example, taking a risk to lead with peace, this is a gift the world is desperate to receive. Putting aside our own grudges, our own hurt feelings, we can actually change the world if we wish to bring peace into our lives, into our families, into our communities.

Sharing the gift of Peace at Christmas is another way we can be the Peace we want to see in the world

## **LOVE DIANA**

Mary and Joseph have finally arrived safely in Bethlehem! The hustle and bustle of people returning home from all parts of the region must have been a little overwhelming. The local shopkeepers might have been struggling to keep up with the demand for supplies for all of the newcomers to town. Animals that had been brought with the travelers were likely taking up much of the room in the streets, making the streets more crowded and messier than normal.

Mary and Joseph would have undoubtedly gone to Joseph's parents' house for a place to stay. The guestroom in their home must have already been taken by someone else so they were offered the stable, or in their day what would have been the cave in the basement where the animals lived. This basement room was probably dark and smelly from all of the animals. There would be no beds to sleep on or other furniture to relax on, only the ground to sit on, shared with the animals.

In this small basement room is where Mary would give birth to the Son of God. The love of God for Mary and Joseph and their love for each other would have been hidden away in this room, isolated from the multitude of people outside. Would anyone else in town even pay attention the love of God coming into the world as a baby or were they too busy focusing on daily life to notice?

Whether they noticed or not the love of God did come!

## **LOVE GARY**

Jesus was the embodiment of God's love while he was here on earth, preaching, teaching, and healing. But ever since Jesus ascended to heaven, the heavy lifting of sharing love has been left to us. That's right, if God's love or Christ's love is going to be shared around here, guess who's job it is to do the sharing? You guessed it: it's our job!

Jesus is no longer here with arms to hug, or tears to shed, or a heart to break over the least of God's children. That's our job now. We are the huggers, we are the ones who embrace the world with the love of God. If we don't do it, it won't get done. We are the ones who are to act on God's love of all of God's children, in all their wild diversity.

We're the ones who need to stand in stark contrast to the cold and unforgiving world out there that would rather tear a person apart than love them.

I'm not saying it's easy, it's not. But it's necessary. So necessary. To be the embodiment of God's love on earth now that Jesus has come and gone, and sits at God's right hand.

Wouldn't it be great if they were having a conversation one day, and Jesus remarked: hey Dad, have you seen what Fairmount Community Church United Church of Christ is doing in the name of love? I sure hope that catches on!

The love of God, shared in world hungry for love, is one of the greatest gifts of all.

## JOY DIANA

Joy to the world! Mary's baby boy, the Christ child, is born! Out in the fields the shepherds, the lowest of the low in society, are visited by angels telling them of the good news of the birth of the Messiah. Their hearts are filled with such joy that we are told they leave immediately to go see for themselves this gift of God incarnate on earth. What they find is a baby lying in a feeding trough with his humble earthly parents and animals all around.

The Son of God had been born just as the Scriptures had foretold. God's hope, peace, love and joy came in the form of a human child so that **all** people would know God understood them and therefore could feel closer to God.

So, we have come full circle in our Christmas story. From angels serving as God's messengers to Mary and Joseph, expelling their fear and doubt, to angels sharing the news with the shepherds. From humble and simple beginnings with Mary and Joseph to humble and simple shepherds sharing the **joy** of Jesus's birth with all those they meet.

The scriptures tell us that Mary treasured hearing the message the shepherds brought to her and the message they brought to the world. For Mary the journey was just beginning and I imagine her embarking on this journey filled with **hope**, comforted with **peace**, secure in the **love** of God for her and her motherly **love** for Jesus and full of **joy**, knowing she was fulfilling God's call for her life.

## JOY GARY

Joy to the world! The Christ Child is here again! Under the bridge on Hiawatha Boulevard, at the Vera House Shelter, in the county jail, everywhere human kind struggles and suffers and aches for joy, the Christ Child brings an opportunity.

But the joy doesn't just appear, does it? The joy has to be connected to something, connected to someone, has to be sparked *by someone*. One guess at who is supposed to be the spark of Joy this Christmas: yup, *we are!*

Jesus represented Hope, Peace, Love and Joy, represents the same in these modern days, but it is really up to us to share these precious gifts with others, with those around us, familiar and not so familiar.

Some of you came looking for a message in tonight's scripture or sermon. Maybe it will be in the historical understanding of the birth of the Messiah, maybe it will be in the present understanding that we, as God's faithful, are meant to share the gifts of Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy in order that they may multiply.

All we ask is that you share what you have, share what you've received, gently, generously, patiently, for we are all loved by God, and by Jesus...the best gifts this Christmas will be the ones you give in the name of the one who was born to save us. Merry Christmas, Amen.