

Thursday, December 24, 2020 Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:8-20

Celebrating Christ's Birth

Merry Christmas- a simple phrase that has been repeated and shared since 1565 when this statement appeared in "The Hereford Municipal Manuscript "And thus I comytt you to God, who send you a mery Christmas." Almost 300 years later, in 1843, Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol was published, which was during the mid Victorian revival of the holy day. The word Merry was then beginning to take on its current meaning of "jovial, cheerful, jolly and outgoing". "Merry Christmas" in this new context figured prominently in Dickens' story. If we recall this story, it is the cynical Ebenezer Scrooge who rudely deflects the friendly greeting: "If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding." But after the visit from the Ghosts of Christmas, he is transformed, and Scrooge exclaims; "I am as merry as a school-boy. A merry Christmas to everybody!" and heartily exchanges the wish to all he meets. The instant popularity of this story, the Victorian era Christmas traditions it typifies, and the term's new meaning appearing in the book popularized the phrase "Merry Christmas".

But what does "Merry Christmas" mean for us on this Christmas Eve in 2020 when most of us cannot be with others who live in a different household to celebrate this night. Or when we think about the many people in ICUs across the country, or the many health care workers tending to their needs or even those whom we love alone in nursing and retirement homes. How can we be merry this night when children have asked is Santa Claus will be safe going from house to house this Christmas Eve and even asking if they should put out an extra mask for him along with milk and cookies? The question of whether this statement is appropriate or if we should be wishing this to others in light of all the sadness our world has been experiencing at this time. Is it ok to wish you Merry Christmas?

People around the world have been living in darkness according to the prophet Isaiah who wrote many years and generations ago. But this condition could also be said of many people living today. People are living in darkness because of the situations in which they find themselves. Current situations which the world has endured for years are still labels as conflicts in need of resolution. In parts of Central America, Eastern Africa, and in certain areas of Asia there are many political battles over assumed power and control in nations that seek to be world leaders. But what has united the world however has been the battle against this covid19 virus

and now a reportedly new strain exists in the UK which is even spreading faster. The world is still in darkness as all people are seeking to live in peace not only within themselves, but within their own countries and with other neighbouring nations. The world has not ever fully experienced peace and therefore we must pray for peace to prevail in order that we might unite as one to live and prosper for future generations.

Isaiah the prophet also spoke of God's promise of the one who would come the child upon whom all authority would rest and who is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. His authority will steadily grow and through him there will be peace. Isaiah prophesied that through this child, his kingdom would be established and there would be justice and righteousness forever. This child did come into our world and it is His birth that we celebrate this night. But we might wonder whether the world was ready for Him, or even whether we are ready to receive him now over 2000 years later?

Who is this baby born in the stable to young parents Mary and Joseph visiting a community far from home? Martin Luther the great reformer wrote about the Infant born in such a lowly place. He states referring to Luke's gospel account of the story, "You will find the swaddling cloths, the manger in which the baby lies and the place which the angel points the shepherds. These swaddling cloths are simple and lowly, but the treasure lies therein—the Christ Child." It is the coming of the child that took hundreds of years and so when we gather tonight, it is in thanksgiving to God for sending us His Son to save us.

Jesus came to earth on a rescue mission to save God's people. Paul writes to the church at Galatia—But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption as God's children." Jesus came because of God's love and concern for the people of the world He had created. God knew that the world was broken and in rebellion—just like us in 2020. And it was God's gift to us that Jesus His Son would come as a human infant to grow and become the One who would save the people. God's Son Jesus becomes Emmanuel—God with us. Through the grace of Jesus even though He was rich, for our sakes, He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich (2 Cor.8:9). This baby whose birth we celebrate was born into a world that was not rich- he was to be raised in a family where Joseph was a carpenter in a farming region. He left the wonder and glory of heaven and accepted a servant's place in life. He also left the majesty of God's kingdom and entered a world of sin and by leaving heaven, he adopted a selfless attitude knowing that his purpose was not just to be on Christmas Cards or as a baby in nativity scenes, but to be the Christ. It is upon His shoulders that the lives of people

rested. And Jesus knew that one day he would need to act in order to save people from their sins and to offer them the hope of eternal life. Jesus died on the cross not for himself, but for others. Jesus was born in a stable, placed in a manger and visited not by people in authority in the community—no royalty, no elected officials, no social media came to see this thing which had occurred except for the ones who had been told to rejoice and not be afraid.

The first visitors to this family were not people who had any authority to declare the Saviour's birth, but they received the news of the baby through the fanfare and bright lights of the time—angels. Angels told them what had occurred and how they needed to go and see for themselves the infant king, and Saviour of the world. Jesus would bring grace to the world and this was begun when the shepherds entered the stable and worshiped the child.

Sometimes we feel we are not worthy to be in Christ's presence, no doubt this is how they felt that night—being told by angels about the birth of the saviour. Could they really believe it? They had been called to see and worship. But this is again the work of God. God wanted everyone to know His Son who would be their Saviour and so he started with those vulnerable in the society of the time. Shepherds- young men whose task it was to watch the sheep and prevent them from being harmed. Shepherds who looked after sheep each day and were in need of a reason to rejoice—after all they had Avery little to do but watch them and meet their basic needs. But it is the shepherds who are serenaded by angels and told to go and see this amazing event. The Saviour is born. And when they had seen him they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what they had said. The shepherds were heard and they were excited to share their story with the Baby and his parents. They were filled with joy, and wonder and were more than happy about their experiences. They were merry—for they had see the Infant, the Promised Messiah and they glorified and praise God for all the things they had heard and seen.

How Merry are you this Christmas Eve? We may not be able to meet and eat with family members near or far because of lockdown restrictions, nor might we do what our traditions have been in the past to their fullest, but what we can do is still be merry about Jesus' birth! Even the Grinch thought, "What if Christmas, doesn't come from a store-what if Christmas perhaps means a little bit more!" Christmas is the celebration of Jesus Christ. And we wish others Merry Christmas in the hope that their celebrations within their households will be filled with God's promised gifts all given to us in the birth of the Baby—hope, peace, joy and love. This is what a merry Christmas is about- experiencing these gifts and sharing them as best as we can and to do so all the time.

This evening we remember Jesus' birth but we also remember his life his death and his resurrection. We share in what we call holy communion because he asked to do this in remembrance of him not just prior to his death but as we celebrate his birth and to remember his life filled with hope and wonder. We must also remember that it is in Jesus that we place all our hopes and fears so that our Christmas may be merry and the love we have for others may be genuine and real. Let us remember these things as we give thanks and praise to God for his indescribable gift to us in Jesus Christ. Let us rejoice and be glad for we can be merry this Christmas knowing that Jesus is born for us and we may renew our faith in him. Thanks be to God. Amen.