

Sermon: Down to Earth Luke 2:1-20 December 24,2023
Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON

Christmas comes in darkness. Just days ago, we marked the winter solstice, the darkest night of the year. As Christmas dawns, days are just now growing longer, but for a while still we will live in winter's deep shadow.

One of my children is spending Christmas in Sweden, in a northern city there, where day light lasts only 2 1/2 hours at this time of year. Christmas comes, in the northern half of our world, in a time of enduring darkness.

And our moment now seems shadowed too. Our world is marked by war this Christmas. Ukraine is a target of violent imperial ambitions. Israelis are reeling from the horrible violence of October 7. Gazan Palestinians endure relentless bombing that they cannot escape. Innocents suffer in many places.

The effects of a recent global pandemic, Political polarization, the demonization of those who are different - transphobia, antisemitism, islamophobia-the rise of authoritarianism... all this casts a dark shadow on our world...

For each of us here, who knows where this Christmas finds us. For some the Christmas will be filled with light, joy, and peace. For others this is a lonely night; in a time when families are gathering some are alone or have strained relationships that make getting together difficult.

Some will have an empty place at the family table this year; missing a loved one who has passed away - we can feel our losses quite acutely in this season.

In a time of sharing and joy some will live on the margins of celebration because of illness, because of personal struggle or circumstance.

Christmas comes in darkness and into the darkness of a December night an angel speaks good news: Do not be afraid... "for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

In this shadowed world, on this holy night, we proclaim a light shining in the darkness and speak of peace on earth and good news to all people.

For into the darkness of our world and into the shadowed places of our lives, God comes. Christ is born.

Luke's gospel story about the birth of Jesus is a story set in a shadowed world like ours...The story begins with Joseph and Mary. They are travelling in response to a Roman order for a census. They live in a land occupied by a foreign power and the Empire has left the common people impoverished with crushing taxation.

They were Galileans which makes them outsiders in this story. To the people near Jerusalem, the people of Judah and of Bethlehem, Galilee was a rural backwater and Mary and Joseph were “hicks from the sticks”. There was a saying in Judea:” Nothing good comes from Nazareth.” From Nazareth in Galilee comes Mary and Joseph, to Bethlehem in Judea, to be enrolled.

Think about Mary, heavy with child. No doubt her the trip was hard. Her back would ache; she would be profoundly tired. Think of Joseph and his concern for the journey. Their road would be dangerous. Robbers and thieves were common on the roads of Judah.

And at their journey’s end, Mary gives birth to her child... no experienced female relative to help them, no familiar family home to make them feel secure. Jesus is born in a stable, a cave, a grotto, dark and cold.

And there they lay their newborn son, not in the crib that the carpenter Joseph might have lovingly built, but in a manger: a nice word for a feeding trough.

As the story continues, we move out to the darkness on the edge of town. There shepherds are tending to their sheep. These shepherds are not the children in bath robes featured in pageants. These are rough men, living on the edge of town, on the margins of society. poor and coarse. It is to these people that the good news of the birth is first shared.

So back then to this Christmas here and now.

No matter how this Christmas eve finds you, the angels proclaim good news to you. In the baby Jesus, God comes to join us in our darkness, vulnerable to the world we share, so that we would know that we are not alone...that no matter how dark our world, God loves us so much that God wants to be with us where we are. God is with us, always and everywhere. God is close to us even in the darkest and most difficult places. In the man that he becomes, we see how to live in a shadowed word, with bright hope, in peace, with healing compassion, with an unreserved love for every person and for all peoples.

Over Bethlehem’s darkened skies the angel proclaims:”Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.”

The angel speaks a familiar Biblical phrase. The most repeated phrase in Scripture, 350 times it is written in the Old and New testaments is: “Do not be afraid.”

The words are an invitation to embrace the good news. There is nothing to fear. You need not fear. For God comes to join you where you are... The Christmas story’s angelic words are an invitation to see that God is here, right where we are this Christmas and always.

Merry Christmas to all. Amen

