

HOPE IS BORN AGAIN

Luke 2:1-20
Rev. Mary Scifres

Community Church, Congregational
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2018

The goats are back in my neighborhood. Yes, in Laguna Beach, we have goats. They're not quite as cute as sheep, but they do have a shepherd (or a goat herder) who takes care of them. It's dangerous work, even in these days, to take care of sheep and goats. Our goat herder lives in a little trailer, in the field with his goats. He moves his little trailer around to whatever cliff his goats are eating up as they protect us from the fires. And at night, he electrifies those fences so the coyotes can't come and snatch his goats. It's dangerous work to take care of sheep and goats out in a field. And 2000 years ago, it was even more dangerous. There were no electrified fences to protect you from coyotes and wolves. There was no heated trailer to shelter those shepherds in the dark, cold fields of ancient Palestine. They slept in the cold. They lived on the hill. And they were as exposed to the coyotes and wolves as their sheep were. So you can imagine that whenever a loud heavenly host started singing, it might not have felt like good news. It might have felt more like a horror story. It's a little scary to be a shepherd in a field late at night when it's dark and it's cold and a bright light and loud cacophony of sound surround you out of nowhere.

And so an angel comes to them and says, "Do not be afraid." The first message of Christmas is that we do not need to be afraid.

Because this is the night when we remember God's promise: "I bring you good news of great joy. A child has been born, a Savior, the Messiah." This child comes to us as a symbol that fear and despair no longer need rule our lives. On Christmas night, we celebrate that hope is born again. For this child would grow into a man, and that man lived and taught a message of hope for those in despair, a message of grace to save us from our fears and shortcomings, and a message of love for

those who felt most isolated and alone.

What are your greatest fears? What are the areas of despair that keep you awake at night? What despairs are so deep that you are afraid you might never hope again. We all have fears. We all have moments of despair, different fears, different worries of our own. Some of us are afraid of growing old and dependent on others; others are afraid of dying. Some of us are in despair over broken marriages, damaged friendships, or lost sobriety. Some of us worry about the state of the world, the state of our finances, or the state of our health.

Into this world of fear and worries, we are given the Christmas story, a story of characters who know the same fears we know: a husband afraid he can't provide a safe place for his wife to give birth to their first child; a young girl afraid of impending childbirth with no midwives or family members to help her bring this child into the world; both of them probably afraid for her very life, in a world where many women died in childbirth. We also have an innkeeper, afraid he can't handle the demanding crowds with all of their needs for sheltering themselves and their animals. And then we have the shepherds – whose fears are of a very tangible, pragmatic nature, as they care for their flocks in the dark cold winter night outside of a small town called Bethlehem.

I am so thankful that the Christmas story is full of human people, these characters shown to us so that we remember that God came amongst people. Jesus came as a person, perhaps the most frightened of all in the story, this newborn baby forced out into the world of light and noise. The child Jesus, like all newborn children, was cast into the cold of the world, far away from the safety and warmth of his mother's womb. And this baby was laid in a manger, a feeding trough, filled with scratchy hay that even swaddling clothes could not make soft.

Why would this story come to us with such frightened characters if not to tell us that in our deepest fears God enters in? For this is the story of God entering into the human story, as God has *"Hope is Born Again" ~ Luke 2:1-20 © 2018 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com*

done since the beginning of time. God is with us; we need not be afraid. God loves us; we need not be afraid. Jesus comes with this message that God loves us in the fullness of our humanity.

For in this story, Jesus comes to us first and foremost as a human being. Jesus comes as a little tiny baby, as all humans come into the world, vulnerable and fragile, as we are all vulnerable and fragile. Jesus comes to know the fullness of our human experience, including what it means to feel fragile and vulnerable, to be afraid and worried. The Christmas story reminds us that when we are most vulnerable and fragile, God enters in. When we are most afraid and worried, Immanuel, God, is with us. For in our vulnerability and fragility, we are most like the baby Jesus, when God came in God's most vulnerable form, as God does every time a child is born.

When we are at our most vulnerable and most fragile, we are like the baby Jesus, with all the possibilities in front of us -- the choices and decisions that we will get to make as we grow into the fullness of ourselves as children of God. And we have seen that fullness in the man Jesus. The message he brings is the message that we celebrate this night. It is a message that begins with comfort: Do not be afraid. But the message expands beyond comfort to offer God's message of hope: the good news of great joy that God's gracious love is offered to *all* of humanity. Jesus came to proclaim that God's love is for everyone: comfort strengthening us in the face of our deepest fears; hope born in our lives when we are most in despair; and grace coming to us even when we feel most unworthy. God's love is for *everyone*, strong enough to embrace each and every one of us, no matter what.

The Christmas story comes year after year, because we need to be reminded year after year that hope is still with us. It's easy to lose sight of hope in a world of fear and trembling, worry and anxiety. But into this world, God's Christmas message comes to us: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news."

"Hope is Born Again" ~ Luke 2:1-20 © 2018 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com

Into that fearful night, on a cold dark hill outside Bethlehem, an angel's voice breaks in. "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news." Bringing the good news of a child who is the promise of good news, who is the embodiment of the good news of God's love – not just preaching that good news, but living the good news of God's love for all people. For the child Jesus grew into a man who dedicated his life to teaching, healing, serving, and caring with that good news of love for *all* guiding every step of his journey.

Into that fearful night, on a cold dark hill outside Bethlehem, a heavenly light shone –not just a single starlight, but a heavenly host of brilliant light appeared to lowly shepherds and foreign kings. All this brilliant, heavenly light proclaims the birth of the most brilliant light of all: Jesus, the embodiment of God's light, the embodiment of that to which we are all called. Jesus the Light of the World comes to us again this night, to remind us that we are part of the light. As an adult, Jesus would teach us, "You are the light of the world," reminding us of God's ancient call to us: "You are to be a light to the nations." Jesus, the embodiment of God's Light, announced by a great show of light, calls us not just to gaze upon the light, but to *be* a light as well.

This is the good news: The light has shone in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it. Do not be afraid. You and I are invited to overcome our fears and be that light with Jesus. You, the light of the world. Me, the light of the world. We, the light to all the nations. This is hope for a world in despair, that every person can be a shining light of God's love. But in a world of darkness, it's easy to forget this good news, and so Christmas comes to us each and every year to remind us that hope is born again. Light shines in the darkness.

Despair will come, as surely as winter follows the fall. Fear will come as surely as darkness follows the day. But Christmas comes as well, to invite us yet again to hear the good news that hope is born this night, not just in a tiny baby, but in our hearts when we recite the stories of Jesus' birth, "*Hope is Born Again*" ~ Luke 2:1-20 © 2018 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com

in our minds when we study the stories of this man's life, and in our souls when we embrace his lessons of the good news of God's love.

God trusts us, entrusts us even, with the Christ Child, the Light of the World, with God's very self. We are entrusted with the Christ child. We are entrusted with the message of good news he brings. We are invited to be the hope. We become the good news when we live the messages of Jesus' life and teachings. We become the light of the world, when we walk into a dark room shining with the light of love for others. This is the night when we are reminded of that good news. This is the night that light enters into the darkness and that hope is born in the midst of despair.

That's why the ancient Church Fathers chose this date to celebrate Christ's birth, a date so close to the winter solstice, the shortest and darkest day of the year. For here in the northern hemisphere when days are shortest and nights are coldest, we are given this season of light, to remind us just as Mother Earth reminds us that light will come again: The days will start getting longer, the nights shorter; the light will get a little brighter, the darkness a little dimmer. That is the Christmas message of hope: that we not be afraid, for the light has shone in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it. That is Jesus' message of hope: that the light of God's love is bright enough to shine through us into the darkest places of our world. We embody this message when we walk into a room and bring a little more light, a little more warmth, a little more hope. For we are the people who celebrate on this night of nights that hope is born again.

So, in the days and weeks ahead, if despair enters in, light a candle and let the light warm you with a reminder that the Light of the World invites you to be a light of the world. When fear comes calling, look up the Christmas story and really hear that message of the angels: "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy." When sorrow comes calling, think of that tiny child who knew sorrow, and yet dedicated his life to teaching and living love. When the doldrums settle in, sing a *"Hope is Born Again"* ~ Luke 2:1-20 © 2018 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com

Christmas carol and remind yourself that we have much to celebrate. In this season, we celebrate so much more than the birth of Jesus. We celebrate the birth of Jesus' message: that God's grace and love are given to all the earth, all the people. And that we are part of that grace and loving gift to God's world. This is the night when we celebrate that hope is born again. Grace has entered in. And the light of God's love is here to stay.