

“A Time of Comfort and Compassion”

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas can be hard. It shouldn't be, but it is. We think back on isolated moments of beauty and joy – maybe from when we were children or from the days of our own children. And we take these cherry-picked memories and turn them against the present moment. Everything is compared to the distant magic of that one, perfect gift; that unexpected joy; that instant of family harmony. Simple celebrations get complicated by increasingly complex recipes and centerpieces, projects and parties that draw on our time and energy. I think, to a certain extent, this is a difficulty that we all face, but add to that years where we face real tragedies of life and it can feel like too much.

I don't think that this pressure comes from Christmas itself – it's what we've learned to do with the holiday that causes so much strain. Think about the average picture of the nativity: heads are bowed and calm; halos dot the scenery; animals watch with quiet awe and attention; the baby sleeps or stares up lovingly; all the while, soft angels trumpet praises amid streaks of bright, blessed light. And that is in the Christmas story, but it is not the whole Christmas story.

Mary, who has never been with a man, becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit. It is a blessing for her that Joseph believed her and stuck by her side, but how many others do you think believed her? How much mocking and shame did she face from others leading up to giving birth? And then, 9 months pregnant, Mary finds out that the powers that be have called for a census. She has to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem – a distance of about 80 miles – probably by foot. Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home, but it seems clear that he doesn't have family remaining there – there's nowhere for them to stay but a room where animals are kept. Tired, dirty, hungry, exhausted, at the mercy of powers beyond their control; broken, but hanging onto

G-d's word and G-d's promise, they pressed on in faith no matter how bleak things got. This small family, huddled together in a strange town might not look as perfect as hallmark would have us believe.

For us, this might be the story we need: whether times are good or bad. We don't need to pretend that this teenager who's dealing with so much somehow managed to have perfect hair and make-up right after giving birth. No, these are people who are dealing with the same forces of life and death, loss and gain that we are. And it is into this world that Christ comes. A fairy tale world does not need Jesus, but the one we live in certainly does.

Jesus is life and light and endless, boundless hope. He who created all life, he who is life itself comes to be our light – not just the ones who have it all together, not just the ones who have all the luck, but you and me, contending with darkness all around. He is a light to us coming into the world in a very real way and the darkness will never, ever overcome him.

Isaiah speaks of the people who walked in darkness seeing a great light – having a brilliant light shine on all the land. When we struggle, that light can feel like a distant fantasy. I once had a grief where darkness seemed like the only truth. It was all I could do to go to work and I spent the rest of my days in bed, numb, lost in that darkness. At first friends were attentive and concerned, but as time passed, they fell away. They didn't know how to help me so most of them just left.

And I remember one particularly difficult night when I had tried to read scripture and I couldn't connect to anything. I sat there in silence, wondering at the hopelessness of everything when I thought of the first chapter of Genesis – how G-d had created the world out of nothing. And this thought planted itself very firmly in my mind, “when there is nothing left, there is G-d.” “When there is nothing left, there is G-d.” No matter what I had lost, how much my life had

changed, however trapped by sadness I felt, I suddenly knew this to be absolutely true. “When there is nothing left, there is G-d.” Even when there was literally nothing in all of existence, G-d was there already. And here, in my life, where it seemed that nothing was left, G-d was still here: Immanuel, G-d with us, nearby in a manger. And that meant that somehow it would be okay again.

Friends, this is what we celebrate on Christmas: not good news for happy people only, but powerful hope that can cut through all sorrow and strengthen all joy. Looking to Christmas, we see a profound moment in history where Christ comes into the world and we see the hope of the future – that Christ is with us now and Christ will come again.

The joy of Christmas is not a competition with others or with our own memories. It’s not a time where we can force the world to conform to our favorite holiday movie. What it is is a time where we can look at the scripture and look to the heavens and know that G-d has comforted the people and has compassion on all of us. And even this we do not have to believe perfectly. We can wrestle and struggle and doubt, but as we reach out for this hope, as well as we can, G-d will see us through. Because through this broken world and through our broken lives, “we can see the glory of Christ, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Let us bask in that glory, in that light that we find breaking into the world this very night because once the world sees this light, nothing will ever be the same. May G-d grant us the strength to sing praises each day, leaning on Christ with all our might. AMEN.