**Christmas Eve Meditation**

**Sunday, December 24, 2017**

**“Joy to the World”**

*Luke 2:8-14 reads,*

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people*. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
    and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:8-14)

***Lessons and Carols***

Tonight’s worship service is an adaptation of the traditional “Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols” held annually at King’s College Chapel in Cambridge, England. A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols was first held on Christmas Eve *1918*. It was planned by Eric Milner-White, who, at the age of thirty-four, had just been appointed Dean of King’s after his experience as an *army chaplain* which had convinced him that the Church of England needed more imaginative worship.

I can’t help but think about those people who gathered together for that first lessons and carols service in 1918. The Great War, WW I, had just ended and the wounds of that terrible conflict were still fresh. The nation was just recovering from the loss of a generation of young men who died in battle. Families mourned the loss of sons, husbands, fathers and brothers, who died in the battlefields of France. Veterans of the war returned home, wounded in body, mind and soul, shell-shocked and weary from the horrors that they had experienced. Eric Milner-White, the architect of the service, had served as an army chaplain for four years and witnessed the terrors of the war first hand. Many of those who took part in the first service must have recalled those killed in the Great War when it came to the famous passage in the Bidding Prayer, ‘all those who rejoice with us, but on another shore and in a greater light, whose hope was in the Word made flesh.’

As we gather together on this Christmas Eve we aren’t recovering from a war, but some of you are shell-shocked and weary from the challenges of life. Others among us are grieving for loved ones who are sorely missed at this time of year. Each one of us faces numerous and different anxieties. You may be worried about your health, or your family, or your job, or the fate of the planet. Each day serves up a fresh helping of bad news. So, what is the answer to this endless cycle of despair?

In the midst of this bleak mid-winter the message of the angel to the shepherds rings true for us as well, “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people”(2:10). But how can we have *great joy* in the midst of the difficult circumstances of life? Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen has made a helpful distinction between joy and happiness. While happiness is dependent on external conditions, joy is "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing -- sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death -- can take that love away." Thus joy can be present even in the midst of sadness.

The apostle Paul knew the difference between happiness and joy. While sitting in a Roman prison and facing possible execution, he penned these famous words, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:4-7). For Paul, true joy was not dependent on how well life was going; instead it could only be found in Jesus.

The angel’s proclamation makes it clear: the source of our *great joy* is the *good news* of the birth of Jesus. “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:11). Tonight’s lessons from Scripture are all signposts of the “loving purposes of God.” “Through the windows and the words of the Bible” we grasp the reality of God’s amazing intervention into the brokenness of his creation. Try as we may, we can’t get ourselves back to the Garden. So, God showed up in the most unexpected way, not in a blaze of glory, but as one of us, as a baby “wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (2:12). Born to be God’s *Messiah*, he would boldly proclaim, “the Kingdom of God is here.” And through his powerful and compassionate acts he would show forth God’s rule by pushing back the dominion of evil, confronting injustice and healing brokenness. Born to be a *Savior*, he would offer forgiveness to folks who seemed to be unforgiveable. He would be named *Jesus*, which in Hebrew is *Yeshua,* meaning “God saves”; an appropriate name for the Savior of the world. His quest to forgive all humanity would lead him on the lonely path to the cross, where his sacrifice would reverse the tragic consequences of those seeds of rebellion sown so long ago in the Garden.

Speaking about that first service of lessons and carols, the current music director at King’s College Cambridge, Stephen Cleobury remarked, “It’s true to say that the 1918 service was so developed in the aftermath of terrific suffering and huge casualties referred to in the Bidding Prayer.” He went to note, “The sad fact is that the two great world wars of the 20th century prove not to have been the end of strife in the world, and the story of the birth of a young and innocent child in a troubled world, as it was then and is now, gives some new and fresh hope.”

So, this is the *good news* that will bring *great joy.*  “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

I pray that all of you will have a safe and happy Christmas, but my deepest hope and prayer is that all of you will come to experience the great joy that comes from Jesus. So, when the wrapping paper sits on the floor tomorrow morning, may the joy of Jesus be yours. When the meal is done and the dishes are piled in the sink, may the joy of Jesus be yours. When the decorations are put away for another year, may the joy of Jesus be yours. When Christmas fades into New Years and we descend into the dark, cold days of January, may the joy of Jesus be yours. No matter what we face in life, the presence of Jesus is good news of great joy for all people.