

Riverside United Church

December 22, 2024

Scripture Lessons:

Matthew 1: 18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Luke 1: 46-55 Mary's Song of Praise

And Mary said,

 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“Words for the Beginning: #4 - Hope is Worth the Risk”

As this sermon has been percolating in my mind and soul, I have been thinking about the words of the opening prayer that we shared earlier in the service. It is part of the resources offered by A Sanctified Art in this Advent/Christmas resource – “Words for the Beginning. “ This prayer is offered as a prayer of confession:

Gracious God,

You paint pictures of what could be,
but we declare those visions impossible.
You speak of the lion lying down with the lamb,
but we spout skepticism and uncertainty.
You dream of a more just day,
but we poke holes in the plan, unable to fathom that horizon.
Forgive us for losing sight of hope.
Forgive us for assuming that what we see is all there is.

Forgive us for assuming that what we see is all there is.
That is the phrase that has been bouncing around in my mind.

Maybe that is because there is so much of what we see is disturbing. But we don’t get all our information from the news, and I have also seen so much compassion and generosity.

Maybe it’s bouncing in my mind because we are trained to only value what we can see, what we can prove, and while we hold science in high regard, we also know that there are parallel paths of truth that hold a different criteria of trust, of wonder, of vision.

So, on this 4th Sunday of Advent - with only 3 more sleeps until Christmas - and with only two more until we gather for Christmas Eve - our Word for the Beginning today is “Hope is Worth the Risk”.

We add that phrase to the bouquet of wisdom that has been forming through Advent:

You are a Blessing,

We Can't Go Alone,

Do the Good that is Yours to Do.

Hope is worth the risk.

Hope is Worth the Risk especially when so often we assume that what we see is all there is.

As we ponder and explore the story of the birth of Jesus, we give thanks for the characters in the story who showed that hope is worth the risk. We have heard the story according to Matthew of how Joseph received the news and how he trusted that what he saw, what he understood was not all there was. The angel prompted him to have a larger and a deeper vision of what would happen.

We have also shared in the reading of the Song of Mary, the "Magnificat" and ponder in awe the courage and conviction of Mary as she imagines the embodiment of the Holy that is growing in her womb. The artwork that is on the cover of the bulletin today is by Hannah Garrity and entitled "Magnify". In describing this piece of art, she writes,

"The central image in this quilt square design is of Mary's soul, an abstract and concentric shape that begins to look like an eye. ... Mary is on the verge of delivering God's depth and beauty into the world. God will be embodied as a child. Mary, the earthly mother of our incarnate God can see it. She can see hope, justice and right relationships. In the Magnificat, she speaks the way of God into being ..."

How do we live the way of God into being? How do we magnify the energy of the Holy? How do we magnify - make larger or bring into clearer focus the love that is God? How do we recognize the way of God as it seeks life in our midst, in our world?

Well, that can be hard when the weariness of the world, when the polarization of the world, when the greed of the world, when the violence of the world leads us so often into fear and despair. And we long for wisdom and leadership.

How is that spoken and lived into being? Well, the promise of Advent is that the Holy has not given up on our world. We can easily think of Advent as preparing to remember a story that's 2000 years old. It can be more challenging to prepare to recognize how that love story is finding expression now, in the present tense as we live into the future.

And this is where the gift of hope is so vital. I've mentioned the last few weeks that one of the things that happened for me before Advent was to go on a retreat, and at that retreat,

we spent some time reacting to various words. In one of those huddles of conversation, there was a group of us who were attracted to the word “hope”, and we had a good discussion about how we love the concept of hope, although it is really hard to define.

Maybe it is hard to define because it is trusting that it means resisting “that what we see is all there is.”

Maybe hope is not just seeing with our eyes, but also with our souls - seeing and trusting that there is more, seeing that seeds of trust, of possibility, will grow. Maybe it is seeing with our souls a larger, and a deeper truth than what meets the eye. Maybe hope is the magnifying glass that enables to make larger or bring into sharper focus the essence of Holy Love.

One of the resources that is included in the bundle of material for this “Words for the Beginning” theme are some hymns for each week’s theme. They have not made their way into our worship but there is a hymn that is entitled “Hope is Worth the Risk” and the lyrics are by Anna Strickland and she highlights some world situations where - “College students gather protesting for peace, standing firm in spite of violence from police.”

Or “ in Taiwan the dreamers flood the streets with blooms, sunflowers and lilies, liberty’s perfume,”

or “Liberian women scarred by civil war keep the peace talks going by barring the doors”

and the chorus reads: “Empires will fight with force or politics, still the spirit whispers, ‘hope is worth the risk.’”

In this Advent season, through the Amnesty write-a-thon that was held here two weeks ago, 250 letters or emails have been written on behalf of 9 situations of prisoners of conscience.

The generosity of our hearts has donated hundreds of dollars and dozens of items so that the needs of those in our neighbourhood are able to be met.

Last Sunday during the prayers of the people, we heard the story of an unjust situation involving Para Transpo here in Ottawa and there was such a sense of righteous anger arise that revealed that there is a sense, a vision, a truth that dwells in our minds and souls, and that knows injustice when it sees it.

We respond out of a deep sense of hope and vision - and because we have not let despair or apathy, or cynicism take root - hope is still worth the risk.

The eye of compassion and hope magnifies so that even in the smallest situations or glimpses, we have the courage and trust to bring the Holy to birth.

We don't know when the lion will lie down with the lamb, but may we have the ability and the courage to imagine, to dream, to see possibilities and glimpses of Holy promise.

It's tempting to think that the work of the Holy is naive, or past its expiry date. or unbelievable because what we have been taught about God, or what we expect or long for or are used to seeing just doesn't seem to be happening, but Advent invites us to remember that like Joseph and Mary we may be surprised by what the Holy Energy of Love and Justice, and of Connection and Compassion is up to.

Forgive us God for assuming that what we see is all that there is.

Open up our hearts to see the world as you see it.

Open up our hearts to risk hope, to dream dreams,
and to not be afraid of either.

And let us be open to the angels speaking into the midst, offering messages of possibility and peace. Amen.