

"Merry Christmas!"

Rev. Jeff Bacon

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, open our hearts to your love for us in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

Our first scripture passage this evening that Lorraine read from the prophet Isaiah, foretells the birth of Jesus: "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ... for a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." And then in our gospel reading, Luke describes the event of the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. It's the miraculous birth foretold by the angel Gabriel to Mary about nine months earlier: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." It's the miraculous birth announced by an angel to shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night: "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord." It's the miraculous birth signalled to Magi from the East who came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." It's the miraculous birth of Jesus. It's Christianity in its infancy, if you'll pardon the pun.

Did you happen to see what some believe is the same star witnessed by the Magi, low in the western sky just after sunset this past Monday evening? On Monday December 21st, which was the Winter Solstice with the shortest daytime and longest nighttime of the year, also happened to be the Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, the two largest planets in our solar

system. The two planets appeared side by side, like a single great star low in the western sky for about an hour after sunset. They will continue to be close through Christmas. It's the first such occurrence in almost 800 years. It's only happened a few times in the last two millennia, and two of those occurrences, in 769 and in 1623, were too close to the sun to be observed with the unaided eye. The last time a person could clearly see this event was on March 4, 1226. Because of the timing of the event, some early astronomers considered the Great Conjunction to be the "Christmas Star" or the "Star of Bethlehem" that guided the Magi to the birth of Jesus.

The miraculous birth of Jesus is loaded with miraculous uncertainties as well as powerful ironies that emphasize God's love and make the birth of Jesus unforgettable. It's ironic that our all-powerful Creator God came to earth as a helpless infant. It's ironic that the star of Bethlehem that guided shepherds to the Light of the World happened in the darkness of night. It's ironic that the angels' message of "Peace on earth, good-will toward men" will lead to the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus. It's ironic that one of the gifts brought by the Wise Men to the newborn baby Jesus is Myrrh, a precious spice most often used to prepare bodies for burial. It's ironic that there was no room for God's Son at the Inn, but he extends an open invitation to us in the mansions of Heaven. It's ironic that Jesus' miraculous birth is a prelude to his death and miraculous resurrection. It's ironic that the name Emmanuel means "God with us" where the Light of Christ comes to the darkness, holiness overcomes sinfulness, life defeats death, righteousness triumphs over wickedness, and our perfect God dwells with imperfect humanity. It's ironic that the miraculous birth of Jesus gives us all new life.

Mary and Joseph took refuge in a stable with the animals, isolated for the time being, from the problems of the world, away from the oppressive Roman rule and their new taxation system, away from violence and conflict,

and they laid baby Jesus in a manger because there was no room for them at the Inn. It's ironic that our particular Christmas 2020 this year is a time for us when we're isolated because of the Covid virus. As we gather to worship online, we are isolated, for the time being, from the problems of the world, away from the turmoil of our lives, away from our disappointments and frustrations, away from our anxieties and grief. We enter the safe refuge of an intimate place with God and God is born in us to the adoration of shepherds, wise men and women, our friends, and our families, irrespective of the Covid virus.

God entered humanity as a helpless newborn baby and was laid in a manger. In such a humble beginning, God identified with the powerless, the poor, the oppressed, and the homeless. But God also identifies with the kind-hearted, the generous, the caring, the hands and feet and eyes and ears of those who nurture God's love in the world, bringing hope, peace, joy and love. Our everyday experiences that testify to the reality of God's miraculous presence in baby Jesus and the reality of God's miraculous presence in our lives today.

I'd like to close with a poem that I found on the internet and amended a bit for tonight. It's called *T'was the Day Before Christmas 2020*.

T'was the day before Christmas, and all through this town,
People wore masks, that covered their frown.

The frown had begun way back in the Spring,
When a global pandemic changed everything.

They called it corona, but unlike the beer,
It didn't bring good times; it didn't bring cheer.

Contagious and deadly, this virus spread fast,
Like a wildfire that starts when fueled by gas.

Airplanes were grounded, travel was banned.
Borders were closed across air, sea and land.

As the world entered lockdown to flatten the curve,
The economy halted, and folks lost their nerve.

From March to July, we rode the first wave,
People stayed home, they tried to behave.

When summer emerged, the lockdown was lifted.
But away from caution, many folks drifted.

Now it's December and cases are spiking,
Wave two has arrived, much to our disliking.

Frontline workers, doctors and nurses,
Try to save people, from riding in hearses.

This virus is awful, this COVID-19.
There isn't a cure. We can't get vaccine.

It's true that this year has had sadness a plenty,
We'll never forget the year 2020.

And just 'round the corner - the holiday season,
But why be merry? Is there even one reason?

To decorate the house and put up the tree,
When no one will see it, no-one but me.

But outside my window the snow gently falls,
And I think to myself, let's deck the halls!

So, I gather the ribbon, the garland and bows,
As I play those old carols, my happiness grows.

Christmas ain't cancelled and neither is hope.
If we lean on each other, I know we can cope.

Christmas ain't cancelled! This is a holy night. We celebrate the birth of a special baby; Emmanuel; God with us; God's Christmas gift to us. May the wonder of this evening fill your hearts. And may the hope, peace, joy and love that Mary and Joseph experienced, that the shepherds witnessed, that the Magi pursued, and that we continuously rediscover, be yours this Christmas. Merry Christmas everyone. Amen.