

To a World Like Ours

Luke 1:26-38

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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December 24, 2023/Fourth Sunday of Advent/Christmas Eve

We have arrived simultaneously at the Fourth Sunday of Advent *and* Christmas Eve.

For some reason, I imagined that this must be an incredibly rare phenomenon (like an eclipse or something), but apparently it happens every six or seven years (last time was 2017). Apparently, I also have a short memory and know very little about how calendars work. 😊

Well, how to approach this strange Sunday that straddles Advent and Christmas, the waiting and the fulfillment?

This is the time of year where there is always the risk that the familiar will become predictable, that the old stories and texts of the season will just become part of the Christmas furniture, comfortable, but no longer really jolting us as they ought to with the good news of the season.

So, I decided to do something a bit different this morning. I am going to anchor my sermon in a poem that I heard for the first time on Tuesday.

The poem was quoted on an otherwise forgettable podcast that I was listening to on my morning commute. It stopped me in my tracks. Which is saying something, because generally poetry and I don't get along super well.

It was written by 20th century American writer Madeleine L'Engle, who may be known to some as the author of *A Wrinkle in Time* which she wrote in 1962 and was more recently turned into a movie starring Oprah Winfrey and Reese Witherspoon.

Back to the poem. It's called "First Coming":

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.

He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

There is a lot going on in that poem. I think it speaks a powerful word to our world and to each one of us individually as Christmas approaches.

For my sermon, I just want to go through each stanza again and offer a few comments on each.

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

We often hear and use the language of “preparing” for Jesus. The seasons of Lent and Advent are regularly conceived of as “preparatory” seasons, seasons of examining our souls, taking stock of our lives, confessing our sins.

Christmas and Easter are such central and defining seasons of the Christian life; we don't want to approach them casually or presumptuously. The state of our heart and the state of our lives matter. Indeed, we are told by Christ himself to stay awake, to watch expectantly for his coming.

"Ready my heart" is an Advent song by Steve Bell that we sometimes sing which expresses this general posture well.

Ready my heart for the birth of Immanuel
Ready my soul for the Prince of Peace
Heap the straw of my life
For His body to lie on
Light the candle of hope
Let the child come in.

It's a great song and I love singing it. It communicates the vital truth that God's coming requires a response on our part.

But there is an important sense in which we will *never* be ready. We will never be worthy. We will never have our lives, or our world cleaned up and sparkling and ready for God in human flesh.

There is not some minimum requirement of readiness that Jesus requires to convince him to enter our reality.

Jesus comes at the point of our need. He comes when things are "unsteady," when we feel imprisoned by our sins, whether individually or collectively.

He is God's response to the cry of the human condition. Then and now.

*He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.*

Claire often draws while I'm preaching. Maybe she needs a way to stay awake while her dad drones on and on. 😊

One of my favourite of her drawings sits on my desk beside my bible. It's a picture of a shepherd with a lamb, and a caption underneath, "God is where the lost things are." I had used that phrase which I found somewhere else for a sermon title.

I used it because it expresses one of my deepest convictions. Jesus goes to the grimy places. He sees us at our worst and he loves us. He meets sinners at the bottom.

I can't hear this stanza of the poem and not think of my chaplaincy work at the jail. This December at the jail, my thoughts returned again and again to a few lines in O Holy Night (which was the last song that our merry little band of carolers sang at our last stop last night).

Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.

Souls need to feel worth. This is acutely true in the jail, obviously. Many of the people there feel like trash, have been treated like trash for much of their lives, have treated others like trash for much of their lives.

Many are well-acquainted with what life looks and feels like when souls are deemed to have little worth.

The Christian conviction is that Jesus' appearing changed something for all the souls that struggle to feel anything like worth. Your soul, my soul, every soul.

Jesus pulls up a chair and dines with sinners in all their grime. God is where the lost things are.

*He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.*

"To a world like ours." This is the line I used for my sermon title, and I chose it for a very simple reason.

Jesus meets us where we are. The spiritual life is not about us piling up enough good deeds to pacify or impress God. It's not about climbing up the spiritual ladder to get to where God is.

The good news of the gospel is that God descends. Jesus comes down the ladder, to the bottom rung where we are, down to where all of the sin and doubt and anguished shame hang out... and he brings light.

Jesus comes to a world like ours.

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

This stanza makes me think of our text this morning, of Mary and Joseph, who found themselves in a tangled situation that didn't seem to mesh, these two objects of scorn at the centre of a scandal.

Mary gets most of the headlines at Christmas, and for good reason. She speaks the words that paved the way for the birth the Maker of the Stars. *Let it be with me according to your word.*

She sings the Magnificat, the song of the season, she proclaims the greatness of the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Saviour. She holds out the hope of a world turned right-side up, where wrongs are righted, where injustice is undone, where promises are, finally, kept.

Mary is the object of devotion, admiration, even reverence around the world.

Joseph gets barely a mention in our text today, but I often find myself thinking of him at this time of year.

Joseph doesn't hang around very long in the gospel narratives. He receives three angelic visitations according to Matthew, one telling him to take Mary as his wife, one telling him to flee Herod's madness, and the third telling him it's safe to return.

In each case, Joseph responds wordlessly.

He did what the angel of the Lord commanded him... He scandalously, obediently takes Mary to be his wife, even though the child she carries is not his.

He got up, took the child and his mother and left for Egypt...

He got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

Not a single word from Joseph's mouth is recorded in the gospels.

He takes his place in our nativity scenes, silent and compliant. We don't hear much about him once we're done with the Christmas story. Joseph disappears.

He's referred to a few more times, to be sure. He is summoned to validate people's rejection of Jesus in Nazareth. *Is not this the carpenter's son? How could anything good come out of such unimpressive stock?*

And Luke mentions him at the commencement of Jesus' public ministry:

Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph... (Luke 3:23).

So it was thought. I suppose even Luke couldn't bring himself to think of Joseph as Jesus' real father.

Joseph has a place in the story, but it's on the periphery. *Joseph did what the angel commanded... He got up... He fled... He returned... He kept his mouth shut, did what he was told...*

But Joseph also said, in his own way, "let it be done as you will." He may not have sung any eloquent songs or spoken any memorable words, but he did speak with his actions.

Mary and Joseph's is a story that doesn't mesh with expectations. It's full of tangles at every turn. It's not what anyone would have expected. We dress it up and make it pretty each Christmas, but it would have been a lot grittier and less idyllic in the living.

It's two ordinary people trying to obey the voice of God in extraordinary circumstances.

And yet it is through their obedience, that the mystery of the Word made flesh is revealed.

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

A few weeks ago, there was a notice in our Sunday bulletin which came from Mennonite Church Canada. The headline: "Christmas cancelled!" It asked churches or individuals to turn off their Christmas lights this year, to "cancel Christmas" as a sign of solidarity with Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem where there would be no Christmas services this year.

Some people were in favour of this gesture. Others were not. I heard from both. It's another one of those issues where the right approach isn't always obvious.

Our hearts rightly break at the devastation wrought on precious children of God, whether they are Palestinian or Israeli. I am obviously not opposed to expressions of solidarity or calls for peace or profound lament. Indeed, all of this is part of the duty of faith.

I spent part of yesterday watching a worship service of lament from the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. At the front of the church there was a creche, which portrayed a baby not in fluffy straw surrounded by adoring guests and docile livestock, but alone, amidst stones and rubble with a solitary candle. It was a haunting and heartbreaking image, meant to provoke and unsettle (and it did).

And yet, I don't think "cancelling Christmas" is the right language to use for solidarity.

We cannot wait until the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice... because the world will never be sane until Christ comes again.

We cannot wait until there is no more grief to share, no more pain to touch.

Jesus came to a world like ours. A groaning world. A world at war. A world where hope is sometimes hard to find. An insane world where the right path is not always obvious.

Jesus did not come to the righteous or the ready.

He came to the real world full of real people, offering real hope, real life, real love, real mercy, and real salvation.

He came, and his Light would not go out. It has not gone out and it will not go out.

I'd like to end, naturally, with rock and roll. ☺ I spent part of Friday afternoon watching an interview with one of my favourite singers, Brandon Flowers (lead singer of The Killers), on Apple Music.

"I know you had a religious childhood," the interviewer said, "and I know you kind of left it behind for a while. What brought you back?"

Flowers fumbled around a little awkwardly for a bit. It was a sharp turn in the conversation that had to that point been mostly about the music.

He landed on the gospel of John, chapter 12, which he quoted:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

After quoting this verse, he said, simply, "I feel drawn by Jesus Christ. I want to follow him. When I do, my life is better."

This morning, I reread the poem that I've been talking about in my sermon. I made a list of variations of all the words she used to describe the world into which Jesus was born.

Unsteady
Tarnished
Anguished
Needy
Ashamed
Grieving
In pain
Tangled
Insane

All summed up in her memorable expression: "a world which did not mesh."

Perhaps some of these words describe how you are feeling on this Fourth Sunday of Advent/Christmas Eve.

Perhaps you feel this way as you look out at the world. Perhaps you feel this way as you look into your own heart and examine your own life.

This Christmas season (which officially begins a few hours from now!), my prayer is that a rock and roll singer's response to the question, "why religion?" would express something of our hearts, as well.

I feel drawn by Jesus Christ.

By his birth, his life, the things he taught, the way he lived in the world.

By his death at the hands of and for the sake of a world which did not mesh.

By his resurrection. By his promise of a world made new and of a hope that can carry us.

I pray this Christmas that we would indeed be drawn to Christ, drawn *by* the Christ who comes, again and again, to people like us, and to a world like ours.

Amen.

