

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

All of us have a birth story...all the events that surrounded our coming into the world. We've heard where our parents were living...who was around when we were born...how our Mother and Father got to the hospital...and any of the complications that occurred. We all know these stories about when we were born. We are told, "On this day, these things happened." For our parents, these are the kinds of memories that are written in stone and are not likely to be forgotten. Our entry into the world changed their lives...not just for that moment in time, but forever.

Now we human beings have some different ways of marking time. Usually, we think about time as being linear: yesterday is gone, today is the time we have, tomorrow is not yet here. We have calendars that can show us the relentless passage of time from one day to the next. That's called *chronos* time: it's linear. But there are also differences in our experiences of time...and we can relate to each of these. As the poet Henry Van Dyke so wisely put it:

"Time is too slow for those who wait,
too swift for those who fear,
too long for those who grieve,
too short for those who rejoice,
but for those who love, time is eternity."

We've all had the experience of thinking that something unpleasant was 'going on forever' when the reality may have been that it was only a few minutes. Or that something we were enjoying just flew by when, in fact, it may have been happening for several hours. We've all had the experience of being so engrossed in something we were doing that we 'lost track of time.' That's *Kairos* time. And then there are the moments in time that are transformational. Those moments change our lives forever. And those tend to happen in *Kairos* time. One writer compared the two concepts of time in this way: *chronos* time is like a stream that is constantly moving whereas *Kairos* time is like a pool of water where we linger. We all know both kinds of time.

Tonight we celebrate a birth story...very different from our own or those of our children. It's a birth story that didn't just change the lives of the baby's mother and father, but changed the lives and the perspective of the entire world. It's a story that's been told over and over for more than 2000 years. It's told in three of the four gospels...the good news. In Luke's version, it

begins by saying, “In those days.....” Luke places this birth story at a particular point in time and anchors it with the mention of the Emperor of the Roman Empire, Augustus and the governor of Syria, Quirinius. This is a real moment that happened in real time in historically verified circumstances. It’s not a myth or a legend. It is a piece of human history.

And we get a description of the reasons why the young couple, Mary and Joseph, were forced to leave their home and travel the 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Just like us, this young couple lived in a time of census taking and taxes and authoritative orders and pronouncements by people who are in positions of authority. This is *chronos* time...linear time....one day following the next in order. But into this linear...*chronos* time...something remarkable happens. Into this drab, listless, predictable linear time there is an inbreaking of the heavenly realm. The long awaited Messiah arrives...the Messiah who always was, always is and always will be. This is *Kairos* time. There is no beginning and there is no end. This new time is not characterized by business as usual, but by the appearance of a throng of angels with “good news of great joy for *all* people.” And this announcement came to the lowly shepherds, the bottom rung on the social ladder, not to those in the halls of political power.

The arrival of this precious new life into the most humble of surroundings and circumstances tells us quite a lot about the nature of God...who does not seek out the rich and powerful, but reveals himself in the nature of a helpless infant surrounded by only his very young earthly mother and father and a stable filled with animals. These are hardly the circumstances of the arrival of a king...of one with infinite power and authority...of one who not only changes the lives of his parents, but changes the world for all time. For his kingdom is one that lifts up the lowly, nurtures the downtrodden, relieves the suffering, heals the sick, challenges the powerful, exposes the hypocrite and seeks justice and value for every human being.

On this day, this infant, Jesus, marks the beginning of a challenge to the status quo that remains to this day...some two thousand years later. We still struggle with many of the same problems and perceptions that were entrenched in the social fabric of the world into which Jesus was born. With the Messiah’s birth comes a time of hope. It is a time that eclipses the fear known then by most people and replaces it with a sense of freedom and joy. The expectations become different. Men and women begin to imagine what life could be like instead of resigning themselves to life as it is. “Those days” into which Jesus was born, are governed by fear. The political powers of Jesus’ day and of those of our own day, play on fear to get their way...whether it is fear of political power itself, fear of terrorists, fear of random mass murders, fear of economic uncertainty, the fear of the “other”, or the fear of death itself. Human nature doesn’t change over time. But neither does the nature of God.

On this day, the day on which Jesus was born into the world, there comes a new possibility. With him comes the promise of hope for a different kind of world. No longer are people

trapped in situations that always have been and that most people expect will continue. When the angels appear to the shepherds with their proclamation of “good news” and “great joy for all people,” the first thing they say is “Do not be afraid.” Get rid of the fear first before embracing the joy.

So on this day, the day that we welcome the Christ child once again into the world, the angels tell us exactly the same thing: “Fear not.” And we are no less fraught with fear than the average citizens of Jesus’ day who struggled with the uncertainties of life and the injustices that prevailed. And we are given the same promise of hope. Jesus’ entry into the world was simple, quiet and humble. He came into the world without fanfare with only his earthly mother and father in attendance in a squalled little stable in a backwater town in a relatively obscure part of the world. The only fanfare for him was the appearance of the angels to the shepherds. His entry into the world was easily missed by those who were not looking for it. And it can still be missed so easily today.

But on this day, in this pivotal moment in history, we receive that same message of hope for a different kind of world; for those angels declare to the shepherds who saw them and to those of us who are looking for them and listening to them now: “To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord...the very incarnation of God.”

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.