

Isaiah 62:6-12

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:(1-7)8-20

Psalm 97

Tonight's the night! We've been looking forward to this night for months. We've done lots of planning and made lots of preparations and we've imagined how this night might be. For those of us young and old who have already hung up our stockings with care, tonight's the night, but I'm not talking about Santa Claus.....even though we all expect him to arrive tonight. I'm talking about something else.

Tonight IS the night!! Tonight is the night that we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Son of God.....that revolutionary who turned the world upside down some 2,016 years ago in such profound fashion that we've been remembering him in a variety of ways ever since. No single life has so disrupted the status quo of the world or influenced humanity more profoundly than his. While his believers refer to him as a King, his birth was anything but royal.

Whether we are believers or not, we probably all know this story.....perhaps since childhood.....the story of what happened on the night Jesus was born. The circumstances surrounding Jesus' entry into the world should give all of us our first clues about the nature and character of God. Apparently, God is not too concerned with how things look. God seems to care much more about how things are.

Jesus entered the world as the firstborn of Mary, an unwed teenage girl. When the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would conceive a son, God's son, she agreed to do that at great risk to herself. Even in 2016, unwed teenage girls tend to be frowned upon, but in Mary's case, she knew that she could have been executed. Her betrothed, Joseph, broke the law himself upon the advice of an angel who appeared to him in his sleep. Following the angel's instructions, he stood by Mary and eventually took her as his wife even though the Jewish law demanded that he turn her out to be stoned. So far, things aren't looking too good for this couple. Apparently, God seems not to care too much about how things look; just more about how things are.

This shamed young couple headed to Bethlehem so that they could be counted for taxation purposes and since Joseph was of the House of David, his residency was in Bethlehem. It's probably no accident that the prophets of old in Israel had predicted for centuries that the Jewish Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. God, as always, paid attention to all the details and placed this couple in Bethlehem just in time for Jesus to be born there.

In addition to all the other indignities of having to travel 90 miles on foot or riding on a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, this young couple.....of questionable reputation.....seems to have been alone in a time when traveling long distances in a caravan was customary. Despite the fact that all of their extended family had also been required to travel to Bethlehem to be counted, none of their family were with them to help in any way. Perhaps their families had shunned them along with everyone else. And they were turned away repeatedly when they tried to find a sleeping place for the night. They finally took shelter in a stable or a barn or a cave.....the stories vary, but it certainly wasn't a 5-star hotel. This situation was beginning to deteriorate.....no hospitals, no nurses, no midwives, no female relatives to help, not even a decent bed.....but as babies are prone to do, Mary's baby came anyway. After Jesus was born, his mother wrapped him in strips of cloth.....rags perhaps..... and put him down in a manger.....the feed trough for the animals. Little did they know how metaphorically appropriate that placement was.....as Jesus, their precious baby, would go on to be the food himself for the souls of broken people all over this world for the remainder of time.

After Jesus arrived, there was a baby announcement made, but the announcement of the birth of the Prince of Peace was not made in the Temple to the High Priest or to the Pharisees or to the Sadducees. It was not made in the court of Herod, the king in Judea. It wasn't made to any of the 'important' people of the day. The announcement was made by angels to a bunch of shepherds in the fields in the middle of the night. In the world into which Jesus was born, there wasn't any rank much lower in society than a shepherd. The shepherds were right at the bottom of the heap with the tax collectors and the prostitutes. They were considered so much the dregs of society that they weren't even allowed to testify in court because everyone believed them all to be thieving liars who were unreliable.

But guess what? They were the very ones that the angels appeared to. They were the ones that were given the command to go and tell the world that the Messiah had been born. They weren't allowed to testify in court, but God chose them to testify on his behalf to the entire world. God's selections tell us quite a lot about the nature of God. Apparently, God cares a lot more about how things are than about how things look. And the lowly shepherds took off to go find this baby that the angels had announced to them.....and having found him, they spread the word. They were compelled to do that. Anyone who has ever had an encounter with the living God.....even as a baby.....will tell you that the experience makes you forget yourself and you feel compelled to take action.

Sometimes, such compelling actions look a little crazy.....me, in a pulpit, for example, could qualify for something that looks a little crazy. But, apparently God doesn't care very much about how things look. God seems to care quite alot about how things are.

Since the dawn of time, God has been in relationship with his creation. But human beings were not and are not always responsive or equally as anxious to be in relationship with God. The Garden of Eden into which God placed the crown of his creation proved to be their downfall as Adam and Eve exercised for the first time the free will that God had granted to them and the original break occurred between God and humanity.

God initiated a relationship with his chosen people, the Hebrews, and led them out of bondage in Egypt into the wilderness. There God gave them the Ten Commandments and explained to them how they were supposed to behave. In effect, God gave them the rules for good relationships with him and with each other, but like Adam and Eve before them, they exercised their free will and wandered away from God. Even then, God still took them to the Promised Land.....filled with milk and honey and all the resources they needed for a good life,..... but once again they wandered away from God, broke the commandments, and used the law itself to oppress the least of those among them.

As a last resort.....in order to claim the relationship with human beings that God had sought from the beginning.....God sent his son, Jesus, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. In short, to impress upon human beings the extent of God's love for them and the lengths to which God was willing to go to be in relationship with them.

When Jesus was born, humanity experienced the first inbreaking of the kingdom of God. It was the only time that God decided to be with us in our own form, not just in relationship with us, but as one of us. He humbled himself to enter the world as a vulnerable and helpless human baby. Only as one of us could he move with us, could he reveal God's love for us in a thousand different ways and model for us what it means to usher in the kingdom of God. As one of us, he could he show us 'hands on' what it is that God wants us to do. Only through Jesus could we come to understand the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Only through knowing Jesus could human beings begin to know and understand the nature and the character of God. Only through knowing Jesus could human beings begin to grasp the fact that God seems to care far more about how things are than about how things look. And God cares far more for us than we could possibly imagine. He wants a relationship with each one of us in the worst way. And he wants us to know not only how to love Him, but how to love each other. Jesus came to teach us all of that and to show us all of that first hand. The teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament constitute the best mental health manual ever written. If we could do all the things Jesus taught us to do, we could all be very mentally and spiritually healthy.

Jesus' entry into the world as a human being was a one-time event, but the inbreaking of the kingdom of God continues to happen on a regular basis. Jesus continues to be born into the world.

So, tonight IS the night. Tonight Jesus is being born into the world. Tonight.....this very night.....Jesus is being born in the places that need him most and to the people who need him most.

This very night, Jesus is being born in the hospital room of a dying man.

This very night, Jesus is being born in the broken hearts of a couple on the brink of divorce.

Tonight, this very night, Jesus is being born in a prison cell.

This very night, Jesus is being born in the loneliness of a nursing home.

Tonight, this very night, Jesus is being born in a homeless shelter or on the street where there is no shelter.

This very night, Jesus is being born in the heart of an unwed teenage mother who has just given her newborn baby up for adoption.

Tonight, this very night, Jesus is being born in the rubble of Aleppo.

Tonight, this very night, Jesus is being born, all over the world in places that everyone else has forgotten.

This very night, Jesus is being born in hearts that are broken and will never mend.

This very night Jesus is being born to those that the rest of the world has kicked to the curb.

Tonight, this very night, Jesus is being born in the heart of someone who is discouraged and demoralized and has given up on life.

Tonight, this very night, Jesus is being born into every heart that is open to him.

Tonight IS the night for the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

Tonight is the night that Jesus proves to us that no matter how stubborn we are;

no matter how bad we think we are;

no matter how little we think about or care about God;

no matter how stiff necked, prideful and independent we are;

no matter how much we turn our backs on God,

and no matter how long we have been away,

God never has .....and never will..... turn his back on us. God knows every hair on our head, every thought we have ever had, every nook and cranny of our hearts, every emotion we have ever had, everything we've ever done, and every word we have ever spoken.....and the good

news is.....that knowing all of this about each of us....and knowing us better than we know ourselves.....God still loves us!

Jesus has shown us the nature and character of God.....faithful unto death.

Unrelenting in pursuit of us.

Undying in love for us.

Unconditional in his acceptance of us.

Anyone who has ever known love of any kind has known God.

Tonight's the night that we celebrate the very love that made this night possible. The love of God for us. The desire of God to have us with him always. The willingness of God to suffer anything for us. The joy of God in us.....and the greatest gift we human beings have ever received.....Jesus Christ.

When you unwrap this gift and open your heart to welcome Jesus, be prepared for the unexpected. Be prepared to be surprised and be prepared to have your world turned upside down!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.