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December 24, 2011
Christmas Eve

“Hope – Peace – Love – Joy”

Hebrews 1:1 – 3a

Luke 2:1 – 20

Text: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,
but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, (a baby) . . .” (Hebrews 1:1–2a)

We have, through the four Sundays of Advent, been lighting candles on the Christmas Wreath. One for each week; each one symbolizing something important about the message of Christmas. It is one of the ways we prepare for God coming into the world. Tonight I would like to present a four-point message – one for each of the candles of the Christmas wreath – hope, peace, love and joy.

1.) On the first Sunday in Advent we lit the candle of **HOPE**. It’s interesting that the Gospel of Luke starts off with history. But it’s really a ploy. Luke is a master of using the literary technique called irony. At the beginning of the Gospel we read, “And in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.”(2:1) The purpose of Luke here is to show the structure of the known world of that time. It’s a reminder to all who read Luke’s account about what was deemed important at the time of the birth of Christ. And Caesar Augustus was clearly the most powerful man in the world.

And as Luke wrote his Gospel everybody remembered the reign of Caesar Augustus, indeed they still knew the power and threat of the Roman Empire. But Luke is chuckling to himself, for now Caesar is dead and in his grave and the message of Christ, through Christ’s disciples, is now infiltrating not only the provinces of Asia Minor, but also Rome itself.

Luke, with his use of irony, uses history to make this Nativity drama a story of hope. In the midst of the power of Rome, a seemingly insignificant thing happened – a babe was born to a peasant couple in a barn because these people were so poor there was no room for them in the inn. And then the infant was laid in a manger – an animal feeding trough. And yet it was this moment, as Luke saw it, which would be pivotal in all of humanity’s history. And he embellishes it to the hilt. The ones who are the first to sing on the first Christmas – a peasant couple, shepherds in the field – were the poor and oppressed who before this night had nothing to sing about. It was so insignificant that the chief witnesses were cows and donkeys, sheep and camels.

Oh, how Luke like to illustrate how God has *stolen* into the normal course of events to change history. If we take this as what Luke is trying to say throughout his two

books – Luke and Acts – God breaks in to our lives – sneaks in when we are not looking, in ways we aren't expecting – to save us. It's not our own doing; not even the powerful Roman Empire can prevent it!

Indeed, the message of God's grace through the coming of this Baby is that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Our peace – our hope – comes as God breaks into our lives. And Luke tries to show us that there is no limit to the magnitude of worldly events that God can't break into (or sneak into) – just ask Caesar Augustus.

As Luke effectively shows, we should always cling to hope – because God can and does break into history. And, . . . we better take careful note from our faith, for the first to sing about Gods coming were those who for so long had so little to sing about.

The Nativity story is a story of hope, and we who are the faithful believers are a people of hope – hope that “the old will pass away,” and the new will come.

2.) On the second Sunday in Advent we lit the Candle of **PEACE**. Peace is another word that speaks the language of Christmas.

A few years ago I told the story that I found in a publication called *New Fables*.

Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” the coal-mouse asked the wild dove.

“Nothing more than nothing,” was the wild-doves answer.

“In that case, I want to tell you a marvelous story,” the coal-mouse said. “I sat on the branch of a fir-tree, close to its trunk, and it began to snow – not heavily, not in a raging blizzard, just like in a dream, without wound and without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling in the twigs and needles of my branch. They numbered exactly, 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd snowflake dropped on the branch – nothing more than nothing, as you say – the branch broke off.”

Having said that the coal-mouse went away.

The dove, since Noah's time, an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while, and finally said to himself: “Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking, for peace to come to the world.”

The God we celebrate tonight is called, among other names, the Prince of Peace. Indeed, part of the hope that we have as Christians is that peace will come to the earth and goodwill among all peoples. But, you might ask, how can we add our voice, our prayers, to those who work for peace?

If you have ever been in therapy you will know that one of the essential ingredients in relationships is trying to understand the perspective of another. When we do not try to understand another's perspective we frequently find ourselves in a broken relationship. It happens on a global scale as well. If we don't not understand other cultures, if we do not try to hear their hopes and dreams we will never be in a relationship that will bring peace to the world.

We can speak peace by trying to understand those different than ourselves, and then we speak the language of Christmas as we acknowledge that others' hopes and dreams are as valid as ours.

3.) On the Third Sunday in Advent we lit the candle of **LOVE**. The epistle writer John wrote, “God is love, and when you love you know God.” Certainly Love is a word that speaks the language of Christmas.

Back in the late sixties, there was a psychiatrist in New York City named John Rosen who worked with catatonics. He broke the precedent of doctors remaining separate and aloof from their patients. He moved into the ward with his catatonic patients. He placed his bed among their beds. He lived the life they must live. Day by day he shared it. He loved them. If they didn’t talk, he didn’t talk either. It’s as if he understands what was happening. He was just there, and that communicated something to them that they haven’t experienced in years – somebody understands.

But then he did something else. He put his arms around them and hugged them. This M.D., this Ph. D., this highly skilled, highly paid physician, who is like God to a patient, who set limits on their life, held these unattractive, unlovable, sometimes incontinent persons, and loved them back into life. Often, when they spoke, the first words they spoke were, “Thank you.”

Piercing through all the technological systems and all the ecclesiastical methodology, isn’t this what God did though Jesus at Christmas? And isn’t this the birth into our lives for which we are preparing? That no matter our brokenness, no matter our incompleteness, we are still loved. We are imperfect people – we all have our faults – but we are all loved by God, and we can love others as God has loved us.

4.) On the Fourth Sunday in Advent we lit the Candle of **JOY**. It’s the fourth word of the language of Christmas.

“Fear not:” said the angel to the shepherds, “for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” (Lk 2:10)

Certainly these are among the most familiar words in the entire Bible. How old were we when we first stumbled over them in the Christmas pageant – after we had rehearsed them perfectly before our parents?

But while we have lived with these words for as long as we can remember, they are not easy words for us. They speak of a great joy – and joy can sometimes be difficult for us. We live in a Good Friday world and are almost beyond being shocked. We see reports of the ugly, the cruel, and the grotesque so often we become immune. Not so with the glad proclamation of a great joy.

Ironically, it may be even more difficult for some to be joyful in the Christmas season when feelings are so intensified. It may seem trivial to talk about joy in the face of all the pain and heartbreak in the world.

But “joy” in the Biblical sense is not a superficial encouragement to be “happy” in the presence of great sorrow. It is, rather, an inward assurance of the presence of God right in the midst of all the pain and heartbreak, and it is to know that the Presence is more important than anything else. He is called “Immanuel” – for God is with us.

Christmas is God’s way of coming to us right where we are – in our fear, our loneliness, our separation, our feelings of being forgotten or abandoned – and telling us

that we are loved with a love that is indestructible. That's all. Yet, somehow, that makes all the difference in the world.

A pastor tells of receiving a Christmas letter from a good friend whose husband had died seven months earlier, leaving her alone with her three little girls. She wrote: "Some say to me, 'This first Christmas without your husband will be hard for you.' – probably it will be, but **without** Christmas my life would be impossible."

For some of you, Christmas, 2011 is indeed, a Merry Christmas. God other, I know that the merriment is greatly tempered by tragic personal circumstances. But my Christmas prayer for each of you is that you may participate in the *joy* of the true Christmas celebration.

At the beginning of tonight's service we lit a fifth candle – the Christ candle. Indeed, it is the light of the world, "the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not put it out." It is a light born into our midst. And when we let that light burn in our heart, Christmas will be spoken from our mouths.

Indeed, "For unto **you** is born this day a **Savior**, Who is Christ the Lord." The writer of Hebrews said, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son, (a baby) . . ." It is that Christ-child, that Savior, Who speaks Christmas all year long.