

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
on December 24, 2021 and December 25, 2021

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

How comforting to be filled once again with these words from Isaiah. "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." These words are so comforting that we tend to endure the preceding verses in the Scripture passage just to get to the cherished message. If you are anything like me, perhaps you've had a similar experience sitting through movement 11 of Handel's *Messiah*, "The People that Walked in Darkness," just to get to hear the glorious movement 12, "For Unto Us a Child is Born." And, yet, movement 11 informs movement 12, and those preceding verses in Isaiah infuse light into the message. Before we hear that a child has been born, we hear these words: "For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian." What are these verses saying about a child being born for us? What's so important about this child?

The Day of Midian comes from the Old Testament, from the Book of Judges. For seven years, the Midianites oppressed the Israelites, destroying their produce and their livestock. God chose Gideon to save the Israelites. The Midianites numbered 120,000. Gideon assembled 32,000 troops, but even with just 32,000, God instructed him to scale down the size of the army, and God kept at him until Gideon was down to 300 troops. To add to the drama, the men carried only clay pots, torches, and trumpets into battle. In the darkness, at the appointed time, the Israelites "...blew the trumpets and broke the jars, holding in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow; and they cried, 'A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!'" (Judges 7:20). The Midianite army fled and was ultimately defeated. With just 300 troops defeating an army of 120,000, with just clay pots, trumpets, and the light of torches shining in the darkness, the message is clear: God saved the day. Listen with new understanding to this passage from the New Testament, from 2 Corinthians (4:6-7): "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." The incarnation, the child being born for us, is like the Day of Midian. God is telling us that we need God. The peace that surpasses all understanding, the peace that endures heartache, the peace that turns our focus from ourselves to others, the peace that inspires justice and righteousness, the peace that is the wellspring of love comes from God. We need this peace and God provides. A child is born so that we know God, so that we make our life's work seeking God's peace. A child is born for us.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered." Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem, to the city of David, because Joseph was descended from the house of David. After Jesus is born, an angel of the Lord appears to whom....to shepherds living in the fields. The shepherds haven't gone anywhere; they haven't travelled to be

registered. Their life is in the fields. They aren't worth counting. Yet, the angel of the Lord appears to *them* to share the news - a baby is born in the city of David, a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord – the angel shares with *the shepherds* the “good news of great joy for all the people.” The birth of Christ reminds us to look beneath the trappings of our lives and recognize our common humanity. Each and every one of us is imperfect; each and every one of us is worthy of love.

Our choir sang this carol, *Thou Shalt Know Him When He Comes*, at our Advent Lessons and Carols service two weeks ago. Listen to these words once again: “Thou shalt know him when he comes, not by any din of drums, nor his manners, nor his airs, nor by any thing he wears. Thou shalt know him when he comes, not by a crown nor by a gown, but his coming known shall be, by the holy harmony which his coming makes in thee.” Christ comes into this world so that we might know the holy harmony within ourselves, the peace of God’s love that magnifies joy and soothes heartache. What is aching your human heart? What is the yoke of your burden, the bar across your shoulders? We are grieving the more than 800,000 who have died from COVID-19 here in the U.S., 5,000,000 around the world. We are distressed over a world broken and divided. The dishonesty, thirst for power, and greed is overwhelming. The issues around education, employment, housing, nutrition, and medical care are vast. Perhaps you are struggling with health issues or employment issues. Perhaps you are struggling in a relationship. Perhaps you are worried about loved ones.

How about tonight we let this church be a stable with a manger. Let us be the shepherds coming in from the fields to see the child lying in the manger. Let us receive this gift of the Christ child into our aching human heart and experience the holy harmony, the peace in our souls that heals. A light will always shine in the darkness. Jesus coming into this world makes it clear once and for all that we are never alone. Never. And, the peace that surpasses all understanding comes from God alone. We need God. God does not manipulate our need for God’s own power and control. Rather, God responds to our need with a gift...the holy harmony, the peace in our souls that nurtures and inspires. Each one of us is imperfect; each one of us is worthy of love. Let us be the shepherds returning to the fields, sharing what we have experienced and praising God. Christ is the gift that draws us into holy harmony and out into the world to care for one another, to be community, to enrich each other’s lives, to make manifest God’s justice and righteousness. “For a child has been born for us... Prince of Peace.” Amen.