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AMDG

Christmas Day 2017

Christmas is a season of peace, it's a season of hope, and it's a season of joy! We are flooded with an ever-present barrage of messages that declare this from October all through December. On tv, the radio, in print, on packaging for cereals, special flavors for our Starbucks coffees, and sale after sale after sale. Peace, Hope, and Joy. How could we possibly think anything else when everywhere our senses are given a constant stream of Peace, Hope, and Joy!

And yet... it's been hard for me to feel much peace, hope, or joy this season. Yes, I know, I'm a priest, and how can I possibly feel anything but peace, hope, and joy? And I have. But, it's been difficult this year. For many reasons, the world has seemed a little darker. It might be the cloud of anger, hatred and divisiveness that hangs over our country. The ongoing wars in the Middle East. The refugees displaced by those wars and the unrest in Myanmar, Central and South America. Or, the ongoing tensions with North Korea. Or the senseless shootings Or all the natural disasters that have brought misery to so many. And, like many of you, I have suffered some personal losses this year - deaths of people near and dear to me, including our own deacon Jim. My heart has felt very heavy lately; and hope, peace, and joy can seem such remote and vague sentiments.

And yet, Isaiah, writing in a much darker time - when his people were enslaved in Babylon, boldly proclaimed these words -

The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness--

on them light has shined.

And a thousand years later they were the words remembered by Luke to followers of Jesus to describe his coming into the world. And those first followers of Jesus were also living in challenging times - the temple had

been destroyed by Rome, they were living in exile from their homeland. And yet, they recalled the joyful words of their ancient prophet Isaiah. And here we are, two thousand years later telling the improbable story of God taking human form as a helpless little baby - the good news of great joy for all the people: to us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

It's an audacious claim, when you think about it: that the birth of a baby to an unwed teen-ager amid the squalor of a stable in a backwater town could possibly matter. And yet there, in all its sublime wonder is the promise of the Gospel: that God shows up when and where we least expect him and always for us.

Even though the world might seem dark...we are not forsaken, so declared Isaiah, so proclaimed Luke, and so it is now. The things we fear and worry about may seem overwhelming now, but they will fade into nothingness compared to the story we've been telling for thousands of years. God loves us, God loves the world, and he will never give up on us. God continues to love and bless our world every minute of every day, and invites us to do the same.

And, yet we struggle to see God amid the discouraging news we are bombarded with every minute. And many more of us wonder where God is amidst our own more private pain of lost loved ones, broken relationships, loneliness, illness, job loss, or depression. The the day-to-day struggle of making ends meet and finding a little peace and comfort in our lives takes up so much of our attention and energy that we have a hard time imagining that God could possibly make a difference in our world. Sure, maybe we believe in God in general, but sensing God's presence – let alone seeing God – in the nitty-gritty of our mundane lives seems a bit much.

But, the story of a baby in a manger tells us differently. We do matter. Our lives and our world are important. God loves us and wants us to love in the same way. And we can find evidence of that love being lived out all around us, improbable stories, courageous stories of people caring for the sick and lonely, of a Pope celebrating his birthday by throwing a pizza party for hundreds of sick children, or a crossing guard

in North Carolina setting up a coat rack for children without them, or the company in Argentina employing poor women to make squealing running shoes out of discarded tires, or the Muslim doctors in San Bernardino opening a clinic to serve the poor for free. God really isn't so far away. He's at work all around us. When I take time to get out of myself long enough to reach out to someone else in need, I'm amazed at just how close God really is. And, the light of Christ is in and around and amongst us - in the parishioners serving food at the Kino Border Initiative, in the volunteers at St. Andrew's Children's Clinic, at the House of Hope and Peace, the Crossroads Shelter, the Santa Cruz Training Program, in the children who post little messages of prayer throughout our church, and in the folks who make it a point to visit the least likeable among us, and in you and me.

My brothers and sister, **we** must shine the light of Christ into the dark corners of our world, into the dark places in our souls where we wonder if it can possibly be true. We must shine the light into those spaces where the world's darkness seems so much bigger than the light. That's when this story of a baby in Bethlehem no longer seems so improbable. Because that's what this story was made for – to shine light in dark places, to bring hope to the discouraged, to bring peace to those in turmoil, and to bring joy to the sorrowing. Just as Jesus declared that he did not come for the righteous, but for sinners, this story of a baby in a manger is a story not as much for those that have it all together, those with no worries, but for all of us who need a little reminder that God so loves the world that he gave his only son that we might have life.

And, so I close with this little prayer from St. Julian of Norwich, who struggled to find peace and hope and joy amidst the plague-ridden violent world of Medieval England. In that dark place and time she still wrote of God's deep love for the world and his desire to save us all -  
Ah, good Lord, how could all things be well, because of the great harm which has come through sin to your creatures?

And so our good Lord answered all the questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortingly:

I make all things well,

and I can make all things well,  
and I shall make all things well,  
and I am making all things well;  
and you will see for yourself  
that every kind of thing will be well.

...And in these words God wishes us to be enclosed in peace, hope, and joy.

Merry Christmas!