

SERMON: Where Hope Meets Fear
TEXT: Luke 2:1-20

12-24-21

One of my favorite things at Christmas is singing Christmas carols. Especially the ones we find in every church hymnal. And I know many of you would agree.

I was thinking recently that most of us - even if we didn't grow up in the church - have been singing these songs for as long as we can remember. We have memorized the words so well that we could probably sing them in our sleep. But we seldom take time to think about what the words mean.

But singing carols is all a part of the celebration. Who cares what the words mean? We just want to sing them over and over again from Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve or maybe through the first week of January, but that's it. Then we don't want to hear them again until next Thanksgiving.

One particular favorite of mine is O Little Town of Bethlehem. I was reading the words of it recently, and I discovered that it is packed with theology. Rather than just telling the story of Jesus' birth like many other carols, this one has so much to say about what God is doing and why the birth of Jesus is important.

I began to ponder the last line of the first verse: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Hope is a popular term in Advent. Jesus and hope are practically synonymous. Fear is also a common theme in all of scripture; the message “do not fear” is repeated nearly 400 times throughout the Bible. But the idea that Jesus, the baby in the manger, is WHERE HOPE MEETS FEAR, is something I have never thought much about.

We have a lot of experience with fear. Over the past couple of years especially, we’ve had good reason for it. A deadly pandemic is nothing to take lightly. But we have found hope in protections like wearing masks and staying away from crowds. We have found hope in vaccines and other advances in medicine. We have found hope in new ways of connecting with one another. We have found hope in remembering how important those connections are. And as our hope grows, our fear shrinks.

I read a beautiful story about a neighborhood in Baltimore. In November of last year one man in the neighborhood decided to string Christmas lights in a different way. His neighbor across the street was struggling with depression and anxiety. She was grieving the loss of a loved one and was dealing with work-related stress.

So this man, named Matt, hung a string of white Christmas lights from his home across the street to her home. He also left a tin of homemade cookies on her doorstep. The lights were literally to brighten her world, and were meant to reinforce that they were always connected, despite their pandemic isolation. When other neighbors saw what he had done, they did the same thing. They did it again this year and made a party of it. One couple commented that they had been considering a move out of the neighborhood, but changed their minds after seeing so many people come together.

This is WHERE HOPE MEETS FEAR. And just as Jesus - the everlasting light - overcomes the darkness of the world, he also drives out fear with hope.

If you're cynical about Christmas or religion or hope, you probably think these are just words. But I can give you hundreds of examples from my own life and from others I've known that it's true. It's real. And I'm not sure I could give you a definition of hope without talking about Jesus. Neither could I define peace or joy or love without pointing you to the manger and the cross. Both are places WHERE HOPE MEETS FEAR.

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

May we all find hope that relieves our fears. May we all bring hope where we see fear in others.

Glory to God in the highest. Peace on Earth.

AMEN.