

IMPOSSIBLE HOPE

Believe in the Impossible Series (Part 4) | Luke 9:2; John 1:5

Procession: O Come All Ye Faithful & the First Noel

Children's Choir: Bells Are Ringing / Handbells: I Saw Three Ships

Are there any of you who feel like you especially NEED the ring of Christmas this year? I do. I certainly don't need more decorating or shopping or traffic. I definitely don't need more eating or events to go to. If I hear one more musak-version of Here Comes Santa Claus, Here Comes Santa Claus, I might snap! That's not the Christmas I need, 'though I pray that Santa is very kind to all of you. It's the deeper meaning of Christmas I long to feel ringing in my soul and for a reason I want to talk about tonight on a hunch that, for the same reason, you might need Christmas too. To start that conversation, I invite you to rise to your feet as we join our voices together to sing...

Congregation: Carols Rejoice Medley

It's nice to hear from angels and sing about mercy and glory and all the beautiful goodness that overflows their hearts. But have you noticed how hard it is to find the Angel Channel these days? The voices we have Heard on High are not doing much singing about hopeful things. Instead, we've got the Doom Channel over here and the Gloom Channel over there. We've got the Impeachment Show and the Murder News and the Botched Surgery Program and the They-Are-Stupid-or-Evil blogs and websites.

How do you approach your day when you wake up to the Anti-Angel Choir: "Good morning America, I bring you bad tidings that shall be upsetting to all people: For unto you is born this day in the city you live in, more chaos, conflict and corruption!" How are you to keep watch over your flock by night or get a good night's sleep, when there's this host of voices around you each evening: [sung to the tune of We Wish You a Merry Christmas] "We bring you decay and darkness, we bring you despair and devils, we bring you death and dying; it's hopeless everywhere!"

It feels like our culture is stuck on this playlist at present. Whether the crisis is blamed on Trump or Pelosi, the Democrats or the Republicans, China or Russia, Google or Amazon, the narrative remains the same: It's all-crisis, all-the-time. Even the story of Christmas can look this way: "Caesar only wants your taxes! King Herod is out to get you! The Innkeeper has no room for you! Evil powers are completely wrecking this world and must be stopped!" It's the Hopeless Channel wherever we turn. Maybe we ought to listen to some Better Angels...

Choir: Angels From the Realms of Glory

When we meet Mary and Joseph in Luke chapter 2, they are on their way from their hometown of Nazareth in northern Israel to Bethlehem, a town located about 97 miles to the south. Mary is a teenager. Joseph is a carpenter a few years older. Neither of

them likely wants to be making this arduous trip. Why? Because there are no trains, planes, or automobiles that go between those two locations. If you are a peasant, as Mary and Joseph are, you are going to have to walk. I Google-mapped the walking distance. It will take between 33-34 hours, if you are in good shape; and you better be, because the last 15 hours are up-hill. Mary is about nine-months pregnant.

So why do they go? Because they are two ordinary people caught up in an extraordinarily huge and powerful system. The emperor, Augustus Caesar, is building palaces and public work projects, and this takes money. To get the money, he needs to more taxes. To max the tax, he needs a census of his subjects. And to get that census, he orders the governors in each province to register everybody. Little Mary and Joseph are caught up in a massive system and, undoubtedly, severely stressed by it.

Guess what? So are you and I. When you leave the Angel Channel tonight or tomorrow and start listening again to the voices proclaiming Doom and Gloom and Enemies and Crises Everywhere, please remember something: You are caught up in a massive system that may not always be about giving you an accurate picture of life. Vast fundraising and vote-generating machines depend on making you listen to and sing along to the chorus of upset and outrage you'll be switching over to. Media empires need to keep stoking your anxiety and anger in order to build the ratings and the advertiser revenues that keep their businesses booming and their lifestyles soaring.

These parties, organizations, and businesses are no more evil than Caesar, Quirinius, or the Innkeeper in the Christmas story. Some of them are genuinely trying to make the world a better place. But put their Panic Playlist in perspective. There is a greater power working for good in this world of ours. And in Bethlehem, long ago, as he was just beginning to reveal his way and glory, Joseph beheld him...

Solo: Joseph's Lullaby

What the Hopeless Channels project is partly true, of course. There is a lot of pain and injustice in our world because there is a lot of sin in human hearts. Sin separates us from God and each other. It makes us selfish or self-righteous, and usually both. I know that because of how much I actually enjoy getting caught up in the outrage chorus toward all those bad people and parties out there. I know how dark sin is because of how I delight in finding faults in my family members and co-workers, while remaining so very blind to my own.

If sin-sickness could be healed in just the people who are attending Christmas Eve services tonight, this world would begin to change dramatically. We would take much better care of one another and this creation than we are. We would use our speech to build people up instead of tearing them down. We would take more responsibility for our own lives and spend less time envying or blaming others. We would forgive others more easily and build bridges toward people from whom now we are estranged. We would see that despite differences of color or culture we are part of one human family.

If the human sin problem were addressed, we would use our power, possessions, and

positions in a more gracious and generous way than we do. We would labor to make capitalism and the other structures of this amazing country work for more people instead of putting faith in systems that erode incentive to strive and grow. If our sin were overcome, you and I would be far more able to discern public policies that were wise and just, and we'd be willing to compromise and sacrifice to pursue them.

The voices on the Doom and Gloom stations are going to tell us that the most important question of our time is who will win our current political struggle. That makes a difference, of course. But far more crucial is the question: Where will we find Someone who can deliver us from our sinful darkness, restore our moral vision, and calm the storms that rage without because they rage within? Mary, did you know?

Choir: Mary, Did You Know?

I read an article this week by a brilliant young composer named Mohammed Farouz, whose opera and symphonies have been performed at Carnegie Hall and both the Lincoln and Kennedy Centers. Farouz worries that people of his generation are losing hope that the world can be changed for good that they are giving in not only to the negativity we've been talking about tonight, but also to the kind of hopelessness that leads to extremism and violence. Listen to what Farouz says...

"Among my generation, cynicism is no longer a bad word: it's being celebrated, and often it's mistaken for intelligence. But cynicism is not intelligence... At its worst, cynicism can be a dangerous, world-breaking state of mind. We have to be willing to open ourselves up and to believe in something bigger than ourselves in order to go somewhere... [Even though we are the internet generation] we have to be willing to listen to, and be inspired by... the learning of a thousand generations of humanity... That takes intelligence, yes, but also trust, belief and sometimes even blind faith."

It takes faith to believe that this troubled world of ours can be changed for good. Some say that's HOPELESS. It takes even more faith to believe that this change might begin with you and me. You might even say, that's IMPOSSIBLE. But thousands of years ago, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah foretold a day when the people who walked in darkness would see a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness, he says, a light has dawned (**Isa 9:2**).

The message of Christmas is simply this: THAT day has come. In the person of Jesus, God has broken into the darkness of human sin with a life and light that can overcome it (**John 1:4-5**). He is here in this place tonight offering you that HOPE. If you have not ever done so, or maybe not for a long time, ask him to forgive your sins. Ask him to renew your character and most important relationships. Ask him to fill all of us with fresh life and light to be the change agents that are needed in every home and school, every workplace and corner of the public square today.

As we join our voices in singing these familiar carols, let's turn off the Cynical Channel and tune our hearts to the HOPE and PEACE that generations before us have found in Christ...

Congregation: Christmas Peace Medley

The Apostle writes: **The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not been able to overcome it (John 1:5)**. When we read those words they can conjure up the image of a world that is largely defined by darkness, with only a sliver of light proceeding from beneath a door off at the end of the dismal hallway. This is often the way people think today. "Things are largely bad, but maybe if we do this, or perhaps if we elect her or him, or maybe if we pray hard enough, there is this sliver of hope."

This, however, is not the image John had in mind. He and the other apostles believed that the coming of Jesus fundamentally changed the creation and its history. No longer was it a dark planet desperate for light. Now it was a world bathed with God's glory, irradiated with his grace and truth (**John 1:14**). The early Christians believed that the light of Christ was now streaming everywhere, changing this world for the good.

We know from a study of history that the light of Christmas and Easter radiated out across the Roman Empire and transformed it. That light inspired so many movements of compassion, education, scientific inquiry, healthcare, justice, and commerce that it is not a stretch to say that our very concept and experience of "civilization" was created by it. Ponder how many schools, hospitals, and non-profit organizations in this country exist today, because of Christ's light? For all the atrocious failings of individual Christians, we owe our system of government, the advance of civil rights, and the ever-reforming nature of the American spirit in no small part to the light from that manger.

Today, the light of Christ is still transforming individual lives, institutions, and entire cultures around the world. In Africa, Asia, South America, and other portions of the global south, we are seeing the greatest explosion of Christianity since the time of the Early Church and the ethics of Christ's kingdom are enhancing life for women, children, and other vulnerable populations as never before.

You and I are also living through an era of history when Christ's concern for the poor has now inspired or infiltrated so many missionary efforts, non-governmental organizations, and humanitarian works that the world is being changed for good in staggering ways. In the past twenty years, the number of kids dying from preventable diseases, or of women perishing in childbirth, or of human beings living in extreme poverty has been cut in half. In just the last seven years, cases of malaria have been reduced by twenty-five percent. It is likely that, in the next twenty-five years, we will eradicate severe poverty in all but a few "fragile states" (like Somalia and the Sudan).

For all that remains to be repaired here in the U.S., consider these beams of light too. As Christian, Peter Wehner, documented extensively in the New York Times this month: "Whether we're talking about the number and rates of abortions; teenage pregnancies and births; teenage sexual activity, alcohol or [illicit drug] use; or violent crime and divorce rates, we're seeing the news getting better over the past five years or more, in some cases at a pace that once would have seemed unimaginable."

I don't tell you all of this to suggest there are not still profoundly shadowed parts of our society or world. There is much work still to be done and, if you know anything about this church, you know we are committed to it. I mention all this tonight, however, to remind us that amidst one of the dooziest, gloomiest, most conflicted and cynical moments in American history, it is worth tuning closely to the Christmas Channel and listening to the voice of Isaiah, John and the Angels. They tell us that the light is still shining, and the darkness is not overcoming it (**John 1:5**) Because of Jesus – who is still very much at work -- there is more than good reason for HOPE. Maybe we ought to climb a mountain somewhere and proclaim these tidings to the world...

Choir: Climb to the Top of the Highest Mountain

Each week, the congregation of Christ Church worships the glorious Lord who is indeed the Hope of Nations and the Light of the World. In his name, we dedicate ourselves to bringing spiritual hope and practical help to thousands of people here in Chicagoland and -- through 90 mission partners -- to tens of thousands of people around the world. If you come tonight simply needing to know that the Good Shepherd we worship sees you and is carrying you in his arms, please just let this service be a gift to you. If you come tonight able to join us in supporting the life-changing work God through this community, please know what a difference that makes. Thank you so much for your generosity. Now, as the ushers come forward to receive the Christmas Offering, let's continue to remember the night when Christ was born...

Offertory Solo: O Holy Night

A Prayer At Christmas

Please pray with me...

[Pastoral Prayer] In the holy wonder of this night, dear God, we receive YOU into our hearts and start our lives again. In the name of Jesus, we pray, as now we STAND with JOY to sing. Amen.

Congregation: Joy to the World

Benediction

In his book, *A Child Is Born*, J. Barrie Shepherd muses over what many of us will spend our time doing on Christmas Day. With this I'll send us on our way:

It would be easy... to criticize... the waste, the trash, the sad attempt to buy affection in a splash of wild extravagance. Yet, for all of that, this is a genuine time of family fun; a day when games are played together, books are read and puzzles puzzled, a meal is eaten family-style, smiles and kisses are in plentiful supply; a day when memories are brought forth, dusted off, and handed round... May [we] find in moments such as these an echo of those "tidings of great joy"? I wonder, would the Christ-child, if he sat beneath our sparkling tree, condemn as crass and empty all he saw? Or might he laugh

and cheer and clap his sticky hands with glee to see his miracle take place again and life become abundant shared in love?

Don't let the Doom-and-Gloomers rob you of the JOY of living as a Child of the Light, even in these shadowed times (1 Thess 5:5).

May the blessings of God Almighty -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- be with you and those you love, throughout the Christmas Day, and until we stand with Jesus face-to-face and forevermore. Amen.