

Isaiah 9: 2-7 and Luke 2: 1-20
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
December 24, 2020
Christmas Eve

One of our Christmas traditions in Odessa involved light-writing on our roof. We had just enough slant without steepness, that we could share a word. Some years the word was peace, other times joy or love or hope. With the lack of trees in West Texas, you could see our roof from a good distance and we liked to think our neighbors near and a little further down the road got to breathe in a sense of God's promises in the Bethlehem baby...peace, joy, love and hope!

As I was scrolled through Christmas stories last week, I came across one that hit home; it could have been us. It seems a family had the same tradition, except they used large independent plywood letters outlined in lights. Like, most of us, the family was a bit behind in decorating amid all the "Christmassy" things that had on their schedule. And their tradition was a bit different than ours since they always spelled out Noel, meaning "the birth." With time ticking and the cold wind blowing, dad finally crawled up on the roof, muttering some "unChristmassy" words the story says, and began to bracket the letters in place. Darkness was falling, he was tired. He shimmied down the roof slope, onto the ladder and gathered the family outside for the lighting celebration. The plug into the socket, the lights brightened and up on the rooftop appeared: LEON!!!

In case you have not noticed...there is a little more light in the world these last few weeks: house lights, yard lights, tree lights! No doubt about it, we need a little more light these days. Even our neighborhood sent out a message asking us all to add a extra shine to our houses and year this year. And no doubt about this, we need the Christ of Christmas!

What will the Spirit speak to you through me, through the message in music, our prayers, our offerings, our movement and our silence this Christmas Eve? What of God's word will comfort us in the strange times in which we live? Through all of the "Christmassy stuff" I pray we open our hearts tonight to the foundational truth of the Gospel. For the good news we all need is this: for all that may be broken in us, in the world; for all the grief of loss or emptiness; for all of the full hearts and joyful spirits; for all of us, no matter our life's situations, God is with us. Always has been. Always will be. God who looks like Jesus is with us. And Jesus' grace and mercy and peace and gentleness and love are like God's.

Of course we know this. But knowing and embracing are two different things. Do we really believe, lean on, trust, count on, find rest in the promise of the Bethlehem baby called Emmanuel...God with us, from the beginning of time to the proclamation in the Great Commission: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." If we truly embrace this, it should be cause for us to pause, to breath in the Spirit and to refuse to let the world tell us that the light that came in the darkness is not quite as bright as it used to be. Christ is alive and well and working and saving in 2020 as Christ as always done!

When we light our candles, they are a sign and a symbol that God will stop at nothing to be with us and to save us. Our hope is this, no matter what, God is with us. As John said in his Gospel, Jesus is God's light in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out.

God has not given up on us. God has taken the initiative to remind us how loved we are. God quite simply asked that our lives be lived in gratitude and thanksgiving, with compassionate hearts and accepting spirits, all of this in response to what God has already done: saved us for a life in Jesus Christ, one much fuller than this life.

The God who comes in Jesus is determined to be known. God has come to us in the babe of Bethlehem, not only to Jews and to Gentiles but also to all who will receive him as a gift. He comes not only to good people, but especially to sinners and outcasts, to us. He comes to save people from their sins. If we are truly honest with ourselves, there is no one who works as hard as God, through the Jesus and the Spirit to let us know how loved we are. What a gift!

You and I know it was not the gift people wanted or expected. They wanted a God of glory and power and might, not entering in the despised, out of the way place of Bethlehem. The Messiah must come from the top. He must be properly introduced by the right people with the appropriate protocol.

But instead they got the child born in Bethlehem and from Nazareth, and he was only prepared to give them a message of the humility of God. He carried the message of God, all the way to the cross, humbling himself and serving us all along the way. What a strange, mysterious, and wonderful God we have!

Former Moderator of the General Assembly, Susan Andrews said it this way: the two ends of the Christian story are what set our spiritual saga apart from all other world religions, God comes as a tiny, helpless baby and God leaves this earth as a crumpled, bleeding body. Our God is utterly vulnerable out of love for you and me, embracing all of humanity, birth and death, and then promising resurrection in order to redeem it for us.

Sometimes in the midst of darkness, it would seem comforting to have a God with "skin on." One we could see and touch and talk with face to face; a God perhaps more like a lighted up Leon! But, what we have is so much better, so much more real, so much more lasting. We can rest in the promise of Noel...the birth of the Messiah, the Savior, the child, human and divine, who can be for and with and in all people, all the time in all places.

What has the Spirit spoken to you through me, through the message in music, our prayers, our offerings, our movement and our silence this Christmas Eve? What of God's word will comfort us in the strange times in which we live? Through all of the "Christmassy stuff" I pray we have opened our hearts tonight to the foundational truth of the Gospel. For the good news we all need is this: for all that may be broken in us, in the world; for all the grief of loss or emptiness; for all

of the full hearts and joyful spirits; for all of us, no matter our life's situations, God is with us. Always has been. Always will be. God who looks like Jesus is with us. Like the Jesus who is with us, may we be Christ-like to all we meet, beginning this night gathered at the family table of our Lord and Savior. Thanks be to Emmanuel...God with us. Amen