

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 24, 2014
Christmas Eve
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

As we gather together tonight on Christmas Eve, I must confess to you it's been rather difficult for me to get into the "Christmas spirit" this year. It's probably just me, but for some reason, the world just seems a little *darker* this year.

Perhaps it is the cloud that hangs over our national mood since the events in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York. Or maybe it is the number of global "hotspots" where violence, brutality, and death seem to be winning the day: places like Pakistan, the Ukraine, and Syria to name a few. Or maybe it is the stench of death that hangs in the air over Africa where Ebola continues to reap its harvest.

We could add to this the grief that many are currently experiencing because you have recently lost a friend or a loved one. And some of you here tonight are carrying heavy burdens in your life right now

The world we inhabit in 2014 just seems to be a dark, even hostile, place just now. As I prepared for this service tonight, I wondered what Christmas this year

would look like and feel like when so much of the world seems to be in turmoil.

What would Christmas feel like this year when the angel's cry of "peace on earth" seems like more of a *wish* or a *fantasy* than a blessing?

I thought about how we would gather together tonight to sing carols, light our candles, and hear the Christmas story. And I thought about how *small* and insignificant what we do here tonight seems when placed against the backdrop of this troubled, broken world.

And just as I was about to hit rock bottom, a portion of Luke's story made a connection with me. We've all heard it countless times, but for some reason it resonated with me.

Luke tells us: "in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. This taxing was first made when Quirinius was Governor of Syria."

It dawned on me that the events Luke describes here also seem very small and insignificant. What does Emperor Augustus or Governor Quirinius care about a pregnant teenager and wandering shepherds? *They absolutely could care less.* Mary, Joseph, and the others – they are so incredibly *small and insignificant* compared to these wealthy and powerful rulers.

Just three miles or so southeast of Bethlehem was King Herod's summer palace, known as *Herodium*. The palace was the epitome of luxury and over-the-top wealth.

According to the ancient historian Josephus, the palace was encircled by two concentric walls with four defense towers that soared five stories or more above the complex. Two hundred polished marble steps led from the bottom of the mountain through the walls and into the interior to a villa with opulent apartments furnished for the royal family and their prominent guests.

A lower campus, at the foot of the mountain, boasted a Roman bath with hot, cold, and lukewarm pools, surrounded by colonnaded gardens. Not far from the bath was an elaborate banquet hall with frescoed walls and exotic mosaic floors.

This palace was, in the words of one scholar, a "monument to Herod's self-aggrandizement."

So when a teenage girl arrives in Bethlehem and gives birth, it's not announced to the glitterati and the paparazzi, but to lowly shepherds, the outcasts of Israel. This baby is born, not to royalty, but in poverty; not in a castle, but in a cave. *Such a small, insignificant thing when placed against the backdrop of the Herods, the Governors, and the other power brokers of the day.*

But whether these rich and powerful rulers *care* or not; whether they even *notice* or not – Luke says that the events he describes are going to change the whole world.

This is an *audacious* claim. How could the birth of a baby to an unwed teen mother amid the squalor of a backwater town possibly matter? Such small, insignificant stuff -- especially when placed against the backdrop of the real movers and shakers of the ancient world.

And yet there, in a nutshell, is the promise of the Gospel: God has a way of showing up where we least expect God to be – and He always shows up *for us*. Whether the Herods of the world ever notice or care, He comes.

Yes, this world may be a dark place tonight, but this world has not been forsaken. And the stories and the headlines that dominate our screens and tablets just now will have their day, and then they will fade against the backdrop of this other story that has been told now for nearly 2,000 years. And the story is simply this: *God loves this dark world, and God will not give up on it – or us.*

The poet and theologian Malcolm Guite captures it like this in his poem entitled, *Refugee*:

**We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol**

**His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower,
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.** *(Sounding the Seasons, p. 16)*

As you walk through the doors out into the dark night, may you be aware that you do not walk alone. The ancient star still shines. Its light continues to bless the world. And that same light will continue to shine its way into the valleys and tough places in your life.

So lift up your hearts. Rejoice. Others may not notice or care, but a child has been born. A Son has been given. The light now shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never put it out.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.