

Date: December 24, 2004

CHRISTMAS EVE

SERMON: A City Not Forsaken

Text(s): Isaiah 62:1-4, 10-12; Luke 2:8-20

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In 1996, at the annual Pastors and Spouses Conference of the Association of International Churches, we were hosted at lunch by one of the local Lutheran churches in a small town outside a larger city. When we walked into the church, which sits on a quiet street away from the noisy and commercialized area around the central square, we immediately felt at home. Apart from the all the signs and bulletin boards being in a language none of us could read, we could have been in any church just about anywhere. Things were familiar. The sanctuary looked like just about any other— the usual combination of pews, pulpit, and altar, liturgical colors, and decorative banners. They had the usual fellowship hall for the congregation to gather in for potluck dinners, with the usual church kitchen. There were the usual bulletin boards around with displays about their youth program, their mission outreach, their women's group activities and their Sunday School.

The pastor spoke to us about life in his town and the work of their church. They did a lot of the same things that Christians have been doing for centuries, trying to give their children a good grounding in the faith, making sure they had a good youth program for their teenagers, getting involved with the needs of the poor and with people in nearby refugee camps. His English was excellent, since he'd been educated at an American seminary. Some members of the congregation had prepared lunch for us, and seeing their smiling faces as they served us in the Fellowship Hall, we could have been back in our own churches from which we had come. It was all so familiar, so normal.

Except that it wasn't. To get there from our hotel in the city only seven miles away, we had to cross through some roadblocks manned with soldiers and machine guns. Many of the

parishioners we met should have been at their jobs in the city where they worked as nurses or doctors in hospitals or as computer engineers or as waiters or waitresses in restaurants or where they owned shops catering to the tourists. Even the pastor, who was to make an address to our conference in the city later that week, was unable to drive that short distance, because all entry into the city from that town had been stopped. (We got around that one by smuggling him into the city on our tour bus, and then taking him home again on the bus afterward.) That town was Bethlehem, and the nearby city from which it was cut off by the roadblocks, was Jerusalem.

The legendary birthplace of the one whom we hail as the Prince of Peace is one of the least peaceful places on our planet right now. There are no choirs of angels hovering in the air and singing to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. More likely the only things in the air are military helicopters, and the songs of great joy are drowned out by the angry shouts of demonstrators or rumble of armored personnel carriers. The first word of the angels, "Fear not," strikes a ludicrous and discordant note in a place where just about everyone, Israeli or Palestinian has to live with such levels of fear, anger, and grief that we wonder how any sort of daily life can still go on.

Pastor Mithri Raheb, our host at the Christmas Lutheran Church has seen that very fellowship hall where we ate lunch, invaded by 300 Israeli troops, who proceeded to systematically smash all the windows, break the tables, and punch holes through the walls. They also entered and smashed the furnishings in his study, leaving only after personal intervention with Prime Minister Sharon by the Norwegian and Swedish ambassadors.

In fact, if you follow the news, you may have seen an article in Wednesday's *New York Times*, documenting that over 3000 Christians have left Bethlehem since the new intifada began four years ago. Religious tourism, one of the mainstays of the economy there has simply dried up, and those whose businesses depended on it

have no means of livelihood.

The message of Christmas will strike many others around the world besides the Christians in Bethlehem with particular irony this year. Bethlehem and Jerusalem are probably not the only cities where people feel forsaken, where God is conspicuous by his apparent absence. Christians in Baghdad, both native Iraqi Christians, and Christians among our troops, are probably equally jarred by the dissonance between the Christmas message of peace on earth, and the grim and violent war in which they are caught up, a war which this week has brought fresh grief to families in Maine.

Even people not directly affected by the violence in Bethlehem or Baghdad or Chechnya do not feel particularly peaceful or calm this Christmas. For disturbances of our peace don't come to us only from the wider conflicts between nations or peoples. They also come in deeply personal and intimate ways: the breakup of a marriage, the heartbreaking struggle with a tenacious addiction, the hardship imposed by loss of a job, the loss of a loved one to the ravages of cancer.

But perhaps it is in troubling and anxiety-filled times like these, times that make us wonder as the people in Isaiah's day wondered, whether God has forsaken us, that we can begin to hear these old texts and this old story in fresh ways.

I suspect that one key to hearing this old story anew is to recognize that one of the reasons we sometimes feel forsaken by God is that we don't really understand, or perhaps have forgotten, what the signs of God's presence are. We often are confused by appearances. We think that if God were really present with us, the world wouldn't be in such a mess. The violence through which we have lived and which we witness every day on our TV screens appears to testify to God's absence rather than to God's presence. A downturn in the economy which threatens our job or the job of someone in our

family makes us wonder whether God is faithfully attending to business or whether God has lost interest in our shenanigans and abandoned us to our own devices. The painful loss of a loved one doesn't make us feel at all loved or cared for by God—quite the opposite in fact. The breakup of an intimate relationship, with all the emotional turmoil and sense of personal failure and rejection that such breakups bring with them, deepens our sense of alienation, our sense of being a city that is forsaken.

In other words, we often construct our own set of criteria by which to measure whether God is present with us or not. If things are going well, if life is treating us kindly, if we're prospering, then God is with us. God is blessing us. We accept, as the poet Robert Browning put it so optimistically in that little poem many of us learned as schoolchildren, that as long as "God's in his heaven/ All's right with the world." A good antidote to that poem is J. Robert Oppenheimer's observation that an optimist is someone who believes that this is the best of all worlds, while a pessimist fears that the optimist is right.

But perhaps we've got our criteria turned the wrong way round. Perhaps our equation of good times equals God's presence and bad times equals God's absence is simplistic, and just plain wrong. Perhaps, in fact, it's precisely when times are bad, when life is difficult, when conflict and loss and anxiety are our daily companions, that God is most profoundly present, if we only had the spiritual insight to perceive that presence.

That, to me, is what these old stories of Jesus' birth suggest. Here is a young woman in a very compromised and compromising position—pregnant and not yet married. Here is her husband-to-be facing the shame and scorn of his peers. Here is their journey late in her pregnancy, by foot or by donkey, to a faraway town to register for the government tax authorities. Here is every prospective parent's nightmare— that labor will begin and their baby will be born

before they can get to the hospital. In this case, it's even worse. Not only are there no such things as hospitals, they're not even near a village midwife. Even the caravanserai in this one-horse town of Bethlehem has no more room for them. They're given a place in the cave out back where the livestock are kept—hardly the most sanitary of places in which to give birth. When Luke says, *“And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in bands of cloth,”* I have the distinct feeling that he means for us to understand precisely that she, Mary, gave birth, all by herself, with no doctors, no midwife, no village women to help, except perhaps her husband, though Lord only knows what help he might have been. This is not a picture that we would ordinarily perceive as a testimony to the presence of God. It is only our romanticized re-tellings and our Sunday School Christmas pageants, and the centuries of wonderful music inspired by the story that have made it so.

Do we romanticize the story because we cannot bear to entertain the notion that if God is present at all, he is present precisely in the midst of the daily, often painful, reality in which we all must live? If we can only believe that God is present when the sun is shining and the grass is green and the breeze is soft on our faces, then we might as well not waste our time telling this old story every year. If God is not present in the very hardest of times, when the sun is not a warming source of life, but a fiery furnace of testing, when the pastures of life are not green but sear and parched, when the wind is not a gentle breeze, but a gale that threatens to sweep us away, then why should we bother ourselves about God at all? What would God be other than a romanticized figment of our imaginations?

No, it is precisely in the dailiness of real life that we must look for signs of God's presence. It was to shepherds, whiling away the boring hours watching their flocks or sitting sleepless and vigilant to protect the sheep from prowling wolves or wild dogs that the angels

sang their song of peace on earth to those of goodwill. It was to Joseph, a man risking social scorn and loss of reputation that the angelic announcement came, encouraging him to marry his pregnant fiancée anyway.

Where have we seen all those things that really do testify to the presence of God? Where have we seen courage and compassion and sacrifice and commitment to a cause larger than one's own self-interest? We've seen it in the courage of humanitarian aid workers who have risked their own safety to try to get food to the starving refugees in the Sudan. We've seen it in the thousands of local soup kitchens where ordinary women and men volunteer their own time to help feed hungry people in their communities. We see it in the faithful lives of people like Pastor Mithri Raheb and that community of Christians in Bethlehem, who every day have to find ways to be living examples of God's love in the midst of rage and despair and violence. We see it in the grace with which a cancer victim faces her death and manages to give strength to her grieving family members in the process. We see it in the courage of the person who confronts a crippling addiction and begins to live freely again.

It is precisely here, in the midst of our everyday painful, often violent and dangerous, and almost always confusing real world that we are called to discern the presence of God, and to live by faith, hope, and love. For it is only with eyes sharpened by faith and ears tuned to the distant grace notes of hope and lives laid down in acts of selfless love that we will discover that the city in which we live is a city whose name is *“Not-forsaken.”* Here and now, God is with us. And in that realization, we will be able to say with those shepherds of old, *“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this great thing that has taken place, which the Lord has revealed to us.”*