

North Kildonan United Church

13th December 2023 ~Rev. Susan Reed

Blue Christmas - Reflection

We sometimes think of that first Christmas – when Jesus was born – as an idyllic time – all was calm, all was bright. We imagine a peaceful scene like one which might be depicted on the front of a Christmas card. I guess that is possible, but I wonder if maybe that first Christmas wasn't a little bit less idyllic than we sometimes imagine.

The world, maybe not unlike today, was in a time of upheaval and chaos. Many of the rulers of the time were known for their cruelty. King Herod was among them, and is often described as a brutal, ruthless and dangerous tyrant. People's lives were in flux as they travelled to be registered. The registration or census had an outcome of further oppressing already vulnerable and struggling people. And the town of Bethlehem, with its census underway, would have been overflowing with people. More people, we understand, than there was space. "No room at the inn." Bethlehem would have been chaos, within a world which already felt chaotic and unsettled.

The Christmas story is full of an unusual cast of characters with less than perfect lives. First, there was Mary, a young virgin, pregnant with a child, and the one to whom she was engaged was not the child's father. Had anyone made that information publicly known, Mary could have been punished, even by death. And certainly, in that time, the news would have brought shame to herself and her family. Joseph was that one to whom Mary was engaged. He found out she was pregnant, and had some huge decisions to make. Regardless of his decisions, his life – indeed both of their lives – were about to be turned upside down.

They were away from home, they had nowhere to stay, we're not sure that they had any supports around them, and they were about to welcome a child – born without the usual comforts of childbirth – even if they were fewer at that time. We can imagine Mary's pain of labour, her cries, and later the cries of her newborn child. And then what? What would come next for them?

Later in the story, we hear of the shepherds – often thought to be a rough and undesirable bunch. They would have lived a fairly solitary life, and always on the move. They would have been exposed to all of the elements of the outdoor world, and all of the threats of predators, robbers, rough landscape, and more. They would have been considered a lower class of people, certainly not among the powerful or elite or well-regarded of their day.

And yet it was to Mary and Joseph – ordinary people of humble means – that the Christ child would be born. And it was to the rough-and-tumble shepherds that the good news of Jesus' birth would first be shared.

At every turn in the nativity story, as we heard in our three scripture readings tonight, the angels told the people to not be afraid. They said those words to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid..." I wonder if the angels greeted folks in that way because they knew they *were* afraid – afraid to see angels, and afraid and uncertain of all that was going on. Fear, uncertainty, change, chaos... Nothing in this story was really idyllic. Or calm. Or perfect.

Strange as it may seem, I actually find comfort in knowing that all might have been less than perfect. Because it was into those messy, ordinary, chaotic, struggling lives that the Holy Child was born. Emmanuel, God with Us. Jesus, the Christ Child, came as a tiny baby, full of vulnerability, full of promise. And in his birth, ancient promises were fulfilled, ancient prophecies realized. A messiah. A saviour. A new beginning for the people. A sign that God was not far away, but close at hand. And as the Good News was shared first with the shepherds – of all people – this was a reminder that God's presence was indeed for *all people*.

A beautiful, tiny, child was born, and with him was born new hope, new peace, new joy, new love, for all the people. All of the people. For the hurting people. For the struggling people. For the misunderstood or disliked people. For the uncertain people. For the lonely people. For the joyful people. For everyone. I think that one of the gifts of Christmas is as simple as it is profound. God is with us. God is always with us.

Sometimes, in the midst of the chaos and struggles of life, it can become hard to find God's presence. Sometimes in the midst of pain and suffering in our world, it can become easy to wonder where God might be. Sometimes in the ordinariness of life, we might miss the new thing that God is doing. But just as with that first Christmas, when God was born into chaotic lives and an unsettled world, so do I have hope that God can still be known in those places and circumstances. Just as ordinary people welcomed the Christ Child and his extraordinary gifts of hope and peace and love and joy, so do I believe that we – in our ordinary lives – can also help bring God's gifts to birth.

That tiny child, born in a Bethlehem stable, would grow up to know the whole range of human emotions in his own life. He knew what it was to suffer. He knew what it was to feel pain. He knew what it was to suffer loss. Emmanuel – God with us – knowing the joys and pains of our living, as close to us as the air we breathe, and present with us in all things.

No matter what we are going through in life, no matter how we are feeling, whether our days feel ordinary or extraordinary, are filled with joy or pain, or all things in between, God is always with us.

In all of the moments of your being – the easy ones and the hard ones, the sad ones and the joyful ones, may you know something of the presence of God. May you be

filled with God's peace – that peace which passes all understanding. May you feel God's arms of love wrapped around you and holding you close. And amidst all that may be going on for you, may you know the hope of new life, new beginnings, and new possibilities, as were born in Bethlehem so long ago.

May it be so. Amen.