

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE : COMMUNITY CHRISTMAS EVE 2019 – 5:00PM

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB - Rev Greg Wooley

Those of you who have been to our 5:00 Christmas Eve service in previous years, may have noticed something a bit different in this year's play. It still had fun dialogue between the angels and the characters of the Christmas Story, but there was a bit of an edge to the last part – when the Wise Ones visiting from foreign lands shared their worries about King Herod.

As we were adapting the play we decided to leave that in, because it underlines something really important: that Jesus was born into a situation that was potentially dangerous. Mary could have been harmed by Joseph's family or by her community, for carrying a child before marriage. The route that Mary and Joseph would have travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem goes through treacherous territory. As we hear each year in the Nativity Story, Mary and Joseph had trouble finding lodgings, homelessness being a dangerous prospect that late in Mary's pregnancy. And then the Magi had to deal with King Herod.

Herod was known to be brilliant in some ways, but was also one of the most jealous men on earth.. Convinced that three of his own adult sons were out to get him, he had them put to death, so that only the less capable, more easily controlled ones remained. Even coming from another land, the Wise Ones would have heard about nasty King Herod.

They went to Herod before going to find the newborn Messiah, the polite and diplomatic thing to do. But afterwards, in a dream, they were warned to head for home without telling Herod exactly where to find Jesus. Mary and Joseph, also forewarned, left Bethlehem and went to Egypt as quickly as they could to avoid the jealousy of Herod. If he was capable of having his own sons executed, he was capable of anything.

When we stand back and look at the Nativity scene from our usual safe distance, everything is so beautiful and peaceful and familiar. We experience with joy and wonder the angels, the shepherds, the baby laid in a manger, the exotic camel train coming from afar. But when we come right up close, it's a lot less peaceful. We are reminded how terribly dangerous it all was. Mary and Joseph had no time at all to just enjoy the safe birth of their baby boy, nor could they go home to Nazareth anytime soon. No, there was no time for anything but escaping: they had to quickly leave for Egypt, and stay there until Herod either died or gave up looking. When we get right up close to this story, we see all the things to be afraid of. We also see that God is right there in the middle of things.

When we are worried, God is there. When we are unsure of things, God is there. When we are sad, or grieving, God is there. When we need to know that we are not alone, God is there. The kind of peace, and hope, and love that God promises, are active, brave, faithful, and present when most needed. That was true in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, and it has remained true ever since then.

That is GOOD NEWS, written in bold capital letters, in these days of fear and uncertainty. From a distance, that may well look like God is unconcerned with the hatred and division in this world, or the climate crisis, staying a safe distance away from it up in heaven. But up close, we are reminded that when things are most challenging, God is most present. The God who was present to Mary and Joseph and their baby Jesus, the God who called common shepherds to see the newborn Messiah, the God who guided Wise Ones to come from faraway lands and then kept them safe, is always present to those in the greatest need.

Tonight's play ended by saying that what happened on that first Christmas was just the beginning of the story, and that is so true. God's desire, for a world where all people live together in love and peace and harmony, still lives through those who trust in God's gracious,

powerful love. So whenever WE are in a position to put love into action to help someone else, we are to be companions and advocates for those in great need, we are to be truth-tellers and peacemakers, we are to raise our voice against oppression and make room for the oppressed to find their own voice. In the same way that God is with us in our hardest times, in the same way that Jesus stayed engaged with God's active love rather than choosing a safer path in his life, we are to trust in God's love so much that it becomes the driving force of our lives. At Christmas, we come up close and personal with the difficult early days of Jesus, and recommit ourselves to his path of courageous peace and love.

The story of Christmas continues, with the kind of people we choose to be in the coming year. May the Good News of God's amazing love, in the smooth times and the rough times, shape those choices now and always. Amen.