

SERMON
“Light, Hope, Passion, Peace”
Becky A. Hebert
December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve

Luke 2: 1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and **the glory of the Lord shone around** them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **to you is born this day** in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace among these whom he favors.

SERMON

“Salvation history” are those moments in life when we are able to recapture the past and let it take life in the present. It is about recapturing the original shock of Christmas that allows us to become as passionate about our God, as God is about us. It is about getting a shiver down your spine when you hear, “to you is born this day a Savior.” It is about keeping **the glory** of the Lord **shining bright**.

Elaine Tebbenkamp introduced us to a song of Peter, Paul and Mary at a “Bread for the World” meeting. Elaine read to us the words to this song for our devotional. She meant them as encouragement, I think, to keep us going in our fight to end hunger. The third verse reads:

What is the memory that’s valued so highly
That we keep it alive in that flame?
What’s the commitment to those who have died
That we cry out they’ve not died in vain?
We have come this far always believing
That justice would somehow prevail
This is the burden, this is the promise
That is why we will not fail!

And the chorus echos:

Don’t let the light go out!
It’s lasted for so many years!
Don’t let the light go out!
Let it shine through our love and our tears.

I guess the song must have still been on mind as I read this evening’s scripture. I thought, we always stand in the danger of letting the light go out—of losing the shocking power of this story. To say that God, the Creator of the universe, the One who set the stars in their orbits, came upon a star lighted night to reside with us—well, it’s mind blowing. And we

Christians are commissioned with the task of not letting this unbelievable light of that night long ago, “go out”. “It’s lasted for so many years! We cannot let the light go out!”

Yet, the story is so beloved, so utterly familiar, that we are apt to be in danger of losing its shocking power...of letting the flame of passion begin to flicker. Oh, to **recapture the original shock of Christmas** that would allow us to move out from under a “ho, humness” to a passionate, lived faith.

Barbara Robinson, taught us back in 1972 that a group of the “worst kids in the history of the world”, who hear the Christmas story for the first time—are more likely to really hear the story...than the kids or adults who have heard the story forever.

And so the Herdsmen this particular year...in *the Best Christmas Pageant Ever...*were liars, thieves, swore, smoked cigars and hit little kids. One Sunday, the delinquents decide to go to church for the first time, because they heard that free snacks were handed out at Sunday School. Once there, they decide to take over the annual Christmas pageant. The bullies insisted, (through acts of pinching and hair-pulling), that they would get to play all the major roles. Everyone thought the Pageant would turn out to be a disaster, but they were in for a major surprise. Through the eyes of a group of children who had never heard the Christmas story before, who saw the Wise Men as a bunch of dirty spies and Herod in need of a good beating, the story came to life again for all present that night.

Maybe we, who are in danger of losing the shocking power in this story, are in need of telling it to someone who has never heard it before. So that through their eyes, the story can come to life—so that “salvation history” can happen for both the listener...and the teller.

Or maybe we need to get ourselves into a **time machine** to recapture the salvation history of our past—to keep the flame glowing. For good or ill, Christmas Eve sort of functions this

way for me. Not the Christmas of long ago, as much—I must admit, as the Christmases of my own personal history. I find myself remembering the Christmases when I was a child in Louisiana with aunts, uncles, cousins and parents. I loved those large gatherings. I miss them. I remember my father, who always got teary-eyed at Christmas. He was a man with a big heart that exploded with joy every year at this time. My time spent with my mother—planning, shopping, and cooking. I remember the Christmas Eve I pulled a hot dish out of the oven and dropped it. Food went from one end of the kitchen to the other. It was a very long kitchen. In the process of cleaning up the mess, mother and I managed to stop up the kitchen sink. Do you know how hard and expensive it is to get a plumber on Christmas Eve?

For you, it might be a reminder of when you were in the Christmas pageant instead of the director. The smell of pine boughs and oranges stuck with cloves take us back to moms and dads sitting around in their bathrobes sipping coffee, while the kids chase the new puppy around a sea of wrapping paper. Somehow, the slightest thing can take us back to those Christmases past, but the one we come here to celebrate remains stuck in the gold leaf pages of Bibles seldom opened.

What are we to do?

Someone sings:

Don't let the light go out!

It's lasted for so many years!

Don't let the light go out!

Let it shine through our love and our tears.

Another scene of Christmas, comes by virtue of the first line of a song performed by Peter, Paul and Mary entitled, "Light One Candle,". This song may well work best at transporting us up that hillside in Bethlehem, where one angel stood before shepherds to shout the good news, "Unto to you a child is born"—while the heavens light up with the glory of God.

The first verse reads thus:

**Light one candle for the Maccabee children
With thanks that their light didn't die
Light one candle for the pain they endured
When their right to exist was denied
Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice
Justice and freedom demand
But light one candle for the wisdom to know
When the peacemaker's time is at hand.**

As this song took hold of me, I began to wonder, who are the Maccabee children? Time spent on-line reminded me that their story is in two books of antiquity that did not make into the Protestant Bible. In Luther's German translation of the Bible in 1534, these books were included in a section of the bible known as the Apocrypha; which means, books not holding equal status with sacred Scriptures. By putting them in the Bible between the Old Testament and New Testament, Luther was saying they may not be equal, but they are useful and good to read. In 1648, the Puritans (our ancestors), opposed these books being in the Bible. Eventually, the Apocrypha was excluded from all Protestant Bibles, and eventually, they were reinstated by Protestants in a separate book like this (*Hold up a copy of the Apocrypha.*). Suddenly it was OK again for us Protestants to read these books, but few of us ever did. Most Protestant Christians do not light a candle for the Maccabee children, but their light did not die.

The First and Second Books of Maccabees tells the story of a Jewish rebel army who fought to keep Judaism from being destroyed. The story goes that evil King Antiochus IV sent to the city of Judah, a chief collector of tribute. "Deceitfully he spoke peaceable words to them, and they believed him; but he suddenly fell upon the city, dealt it a severe blow, and destroyed many, plundered the city, burned it, and took captive the women and children." (*1st Maccabees*

1: 30-32) Then they took hold of the **temple and ordered the people to give up their beliefs** and become one under the King's pagan religion. Some of the people unwilling to do give in went into hiding in the wilderness. Soldiers pursued, found them, and called them out. They chose to remain in hiding, to not answer or defend themselves. They did not hurl one stone or barricade their hiding places, for they said, "Let us all die in our innocence; heaven and earth testify for us that you are killing us unjustly." The enemy attacked on the Sabbath, and they died. (*1 Maccabees 2: 36-38a*)

When another group of devout Jews heard of this, they mourned deeply and said, "If we all do as our brethren have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives, they will destroy us from the earth." And the sons of Mattathias, known as the Maccabee children, lead a revolt that lasted for more than two decades. Eventually, the evil king's forces retreated from Palestine. In the year 142 BCE, after more than 500 years of domination, the Jews were again masters of their own fate.

Now the thing that shocks me most in all of this is that Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul, and Mary, wrote "Light One Candle." Peter is Jewish. He knows about the Maccabees, but he was also a staunch political activist of the "60's" that opposed the Vietnam War—which leads me to believe he was a pacifist like me. Yet, he sees the importance of not letting the light of the Maccabee children die.

Someone sings:

Light one candle for the Maccabee children

With thanks that their light didn't die

Light one candle for the pain they endured

When their right to exist was denied

Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice

Justice and freedom demand

**But light one candle for the wisdom to know
When the peacemaker's time is at hand.**

I've struggled for weeks over whether I could maintain my pacifistic, antiwar, antiviolence stance. Then one day at lunch with a dear friend—I remembered the day, as if was yesterday or today—that the angel shouted to us, “Unto you is born this day a Savior, who is the anointed One.” And the heavens light up and are filled with the heavenly host singing, “Peace among all with whom God is pleased!”

Can you fill the electricity in the air? Are there not goose bumps on your arms and a chill running down your spine? For unto us this holy night, “...a child is born.” And while we may still need to light a candle for the Maccabee children, and our children in Iraq and Afghanistan, our children in so many war torn places—for they are all our children...for they are all children of God, and therefore, truly our own kin—who fight because they feel their rights to exist are in jeopardy. Some fight for us. Some fight for those who have suffered in silence for a very long time, who feel that evil is polluting their mosques, temples, and beliefs—who do not yet know that there is no such thing as a holy war.

Someone sings:

**Light one candle for the strength that we need
To never become our own foe
And light one candle for those who are suffering
Pain we learned so long ago
Light one candle for all we believe in
That anger not tear us apart
And light one candle to find us together
With peace as the song in our hearts.
Don't let the light go out!**