

December 24, 2023
The Nativity of Our Lord—Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-20
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

A Deeper Yearning

I know that I'm not the only one. I know that I'm not the only one who struggled to get into the Christmas spirit this year. I know that I'm not the only one who felt like the holidays crept up on me this year. I know that I'm not the only one who was slow to decorate, slow to shop, slow to wrap, slow to prepare for this Christmas. I know that I'm not the only one who, even now that it is upon us, is struggling to embrace the trappings of Christmas that have meant so much to me over the years.

I know that I'm not the only one, because in conversations that I've had with many people over the weeks leading up to Christmas I've heard them express the same kinds of things that I'm feeling.

"I can't believe that Christmas is so soon," people have said to me. Yes, I can relate to that.

"I don't know why, but I'm just not feeling it this year," people have said to me. Yes, I can relate to that.

"I'd better get moving or it's just not going to happen," people have said to me. Yes, I can relate to that too.

I've heard those kinds of sentiments from people here at Emmanuel, from friends, from neighbors over these weeks of December.

It was actually kind of a relief to hear it from other people, to know that I wasn't alone, in my struggles to get my Christmas "merry" into gear.

It was at prayer group and at a Christmas pageant rehearsal, when an answer snapped into focus for me as to why I and so many people, people who I know to

be happy, festive people most of the time and certainly, at Christmastime, are struggling to be merry this Christmas too.

As we usually do at prayer group, we were checking in with each other, sharing our stories and news from the week since the last prayer group and sharing prayer requests. And one of the things that many of us mentioned is that “blah” feeling about Christmas, that it was all too much, too fast, we weren’t ready, weren’t feeling “it”.

And when we were sharing our prayer requests, in the midst of sharing news about sick family and friends, work concerns, and church needs, we also talked about things going on in the world. We’ve been remembering the war in Ukraine in our prayers ever since it started. We’ve also been praying for the war in Israel and Gaza since it started. We’ve been praying for the hostages, for civilians, for the terrorized and traumatized, for the assaulted and abused, for the bereaved and the bombed. We’ve also been praying for those places in the world that don’t make the news where terror and violence hold sway and make it impossible for people to live anything close to what we could consider to be a normal life.

And that’s when it hit me that, perhaps the reason that so many of us are struggling to get into the Christmas spirit is that we have a deeper yearning this year, a yearning for more than the trappings of Christmas, the externals of Christmas, decorated houses, lit up trees, cookies baked, presents wrapped, gatherings held, a yearning more than all of that can meet. We have a deeper yearning this year, for the promises of Christmas to be fulfilled.

And now I have to tell you about the Christmas pageant incident. Not the incident of a little sheep going rouge and shouting his one and only line “Baa” at the top of his voice as he ran up and down the aisle during the rehearsal, while the speaking shepherd said, “It’s quiet up here in these hills.”

I’m talking about an incident that happened when the pageant was being developed. Normally what happens when the Christmas pageant is created is the

Confirmation class comes up with an idea, a premise and the characters that they would like to play within the premise that they have come up with, and sometimes some lines or flow of the pageant.

Because of the time constraints that we're under given our Confirmation curriculum, once the idea is developed, I then take the Confirmation students' ideas and write a script that, is, hopefully, a faithful representation of the ideas that they came up with.

I give them the script and then we rehearse it until they know it well and are ready to share it with the congregation.

Usually, the script that I give them is the script that we use, but this year there was one line in the script that caused something of a creative conflict between the script developers (the Confirmation students) and the script writer (me). And the line that they took issue with wasn't a line that I originally wrote. In reality, their argument wasn't with me. It was with the Bible.

You see, in the version of the Bible that we read in here at Emmanuel, the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, the angel Gabriel, who announces the good news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, with those well-known words, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord," (Luke 2:11) is later joined by a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." (Luke 2:14)

So, I wrote that line into the script. A line for our little band of angels, Emmanuel's own heavenly host, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors." (Luke 2:14)

But that line caused a revolt. They didn't want the line to read "peace among those whom he favors." They wanted the older version of the line, that appears only in King James translations of the Bible, updated a little bit. They wanted it to

say, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, and goodwill toward all.”

I debated with them a little bit about changing the biblical text, in spite of how well-intentioned I knew that they were, but they were adamant. It had to be peace and good will toward all.

And then it hit me that what I was seeing, in those 7th grade kids was that same deeper yearning that I had seen in the Prayer Group participants a couple of weeks before. That yearning, that deeper yearning is for peace.

What the prayer group, the Confirmation class, and, I suspect, many of us who have had trouble getting into the Christmas spirit this year, are yearning for more than colored lights or Christmas cookies or fancy presents or all of the merriness or extravagance in the world, is peace.

Peace in our homes, peace in our hearts, peace in our families, peace in our communities. peace in our country, peace in our world. Peace in Ukraine, peace in Sudan, peace in Haiti, peace in Israel, peace in the West Bank, peace in Gaza, peace in Bethlehem, peace in Yemen, peace in Prague. Peace in the homes and in the hearts of everyone who is experiencing their first Christmas without a loved one, peace for everyone for whom grief is a constant companion peace for everyone who is overwhelmed by the sorrows and the needs of the world, peace for the sufferers and peace for the helpers and the healers. Peace is that deeper yearning.

And the Confirmation class reminded me that peace is only peace if it's for everyone, if the angel's message, which is good news of great joy for **all** the people, includes peace for all; goodwill for all.

I was pretty impressed with the students for their theological depth, that they believe in their core, that God's grace, God's mercy, God's good news, God's peace, is for all people, and needs to be extended to all people.

So, we changed the line, to the deeply yearned for promise of Christmas, peace and good will towards all.

Of course, human beings that we are, conversations about war and peace, conversations about struggles and conflicts, conversations about peace makers and peace stealers often devolve into who's to blame, into who deserves what, into a binary conversation about who's right and who's wrong, and which side are you on, but on this night, with our hearts broken open by the desperate needs and suffering of the world, but also, with our hearts broken open by the great hope and promises of this night, perhaps we could not go there.

Perhaps instead on this holy night, when in our hearts we gather around the manger and look with wonder on a sleeping newborn who is Emmanuel, God with us, we could let the children lead us and join them in their holy hopes, in their deep, deep yearning for peace.

And the angel's message, the angel's song is for us.

"For behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all the people to you," (Luke 2:10-11) to me, to us, to this whole broken and beautiful world, "is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah," (Luke 2:11) who is the Prince of Peace, who is Christ the Lord. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and good will toward all.

Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas!