

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
December 24, 2017

“In the Dark Times, What Dare We Sing?”

“... In that region there were shepherds living
In the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.”
Luke 2:8

PRELUDE

The church's journey through
the season of Advent
draws us near to the day of
great anticipation,
the celebration of Christmas,
and the gospel affirmation
that God dares come to us.

As we heard in the Rowan Williams poem,

**He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.**

In scripture, the response to the Advent
is a concert of song. The song comes
suddenly, and seemingly it penetrates
the hearts of those who are receptive
and full of yearnings.

**“Glory to the God in the highest heaven,
And on earth peace among those God favors!”**

This is the **“angel anthem”** recorded for us
in the Nativity lesson from Luke's gospel.
The words are said to be sung by

a **“heavenly host”** -
check that -
“a multitude of the heavenly host,”
in response to the
“good news of great joy”
Angel-mailed to shepherds
watching their flocks by night.

Who is this singing, this multitude?

The author of this gospel uses the
Greek term, *stratia*, a feminine noun
which translates as **“an army.”**
And what is this army of angels
daring to sing?

Good news, our author writes. Good news.
To you is born this day ... a Savior,
who is the Christ, the Lord (see Luke 2:10).

We are a people in need of good news.
Not Fox News. Not CNN News.
Not NPR and its Morning Report,
or All Things Considered.
Not Disney/ESPN News - as if the
entertainment industry has either
the power or the interest in revising
our lives as they are. Let us not
forget Neil Postman’s thesis, first set forth
over 30 years ago, that as a culture, with so
much at hand to quickly satisfy,
we are **“amusing ourselves to death.”**

We are in need of an alternative news Source;
a news feed of an altogether different kind -
news that will honestly and forthrightly
address and alter

a sorry state of mind,
to lift our crestfallen spirits,
to save us the dark times into which we –
as church, as state, as world, have fallen.

I suggest this evening,
we are a people walking in darkness;
and though we may have caught
 some glimmer of light,
still we are bewildered and perplexed.
And we seem to have made a truce –
 with our circumstances;
as if post-truth tweets and sowing
 seeds of distrust and contempt
 are normal and acceptable;
as if bigotry and racial discord,
and sexual escapades and abuse
 that dehumanize one at
the expense of another's "executive privilege"
was ever normative and acceptable
 in the world.

We are living in a new dark age.
And the question that comes,
in the dark times,
what dare we sing?

The German poet/playwright
Bertoldt once asked and answered
what was for him a compelling question:

**"In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing.
About the dark times."**

What does such a song sound like?

It was over 30 years ago that Leonard Cohen composed a dark song for dark times, "Everybody Knows."

**Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed
Everybody knows that the war is over
Everybody knows the good guys lost
Everybody knows the fight was fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
That's how it goes
Everybody knows**

Christmas comes to shatter,
to amend,
to alter
such an understanding of
the dark times that envelope us.
Christmas comes,
not to make us feel good,
but to pray, and plot, and implement
good, as good is conceived in the
love of Jesus.

It is here that we need be careful of
what gospel we peddle, and to
which we adhere, for there are opposite,
competing channels singing in the
dark times, all in the name of Jesus Christ.

I was walking on Berry St., headed west,
coming to church, and I heard music
being broadcast, piped out into the
air, wafting over sidewalks and streets.
It was soft and appealing. And I found
myself saying, yes, that's the Christmas
for which I yearn.

**Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Let your heart be light
From now on your troubles will be out of sight
Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Make the Yuletide gay
From now on your troubles will be miles away ...**

Lots of folks have covered this song.
I think I prefer the Judy Garland version,
(although Sam Smith comes close!).
In Judy's rendition, you can pick up
on some reservation -
you can see it in her eyes, questioning,
as she voiced wishful thinking,
as if Christmas is a charm
to chase our troubles miles away,
to keep them at bay.

There is another song we need hear at
Christmas, a Christmas in a dark age.
It is the anthem directed
to the shepherds in the audience.

The shepherds were an unlikely lot
to hear the angel army concert.
They were "watching their flocks"
in the field - but I'm not sure
I've fully appreciated the notion
they were "abiding" in the field;
the field served as their "lodging;"
they were "living" in the field (Luke 2:8,
NRSV). These shepherds are a migrant
class; they go where the grass is green,
where the sheep can feed. They don't
have a permanent address. They are
not settled; they are nomadic, a wandering class,
living on their labor and their wits.

They were not a corporation;
they are not rich; they don't
need tax breaks to maintain levels of
luxury that are hard and demanding.

No - the shepherds are living on the edge,
working hard just to get by,
without much hope of ever getting ahead.

Yet - the shepherds are given
priority seating, premium placement:
center stage, front row
to hear and see what good from God
is unfolding to save and rescue
humanity from its dark and
dangerous proclivities.

The shepherds are first to light the
fire signaling great change is
on the horizon - for a Child is
born for us - and when the Child is
recognized as Gift of God, a new
day dawns, full of the peace
God intends
for all the world.

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I was reminded the other day.
This is the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther
King's final Christmas worship (Marion
Wright Edelman mentioned this). He made
reference to the "**dream**" he often preached,
and acknowledged it seemingly had turned
into a nightmare. He spoke of being a victim
of "**deferred dreams,**" "**blasted hopes.**"
In 1967 - war and hate and strife - on the rise.
Yet he refused to reassess the fundamental
convictions that determined his faith.

Still he lived in pursuit of Christmas vision.
And he spoke of having “**cosmic companionship**”
in addressing all the forces of fear and discord
that harrow and haunt life.

This is our faith: “we continue to hope for
Peace on earth and good will toward humanity.”

In the pursuit of such truth,
we have cosmic companionship.

We have Child with us, for us.

We have the light of the Child
to lead and guide us.

We have the love of the Child
to define us.

It is so much more than “**pious dream,**”
some utopian scheme. It is the life
Christmas invites us to keep,
to defend and treasure,
to sing with hope and joy.

In the dark times,
will there be singing,
singing of something other
than the dark times?

Indeed, we sing the glory of God,
for the gift of a Child, the Wonderful Counselor,
the Prince of Peace.

We sing Wisdom with us, for us.

We sing the tender mercies of our God,
that come by way of Cradle and consent.

Let this be our source of hope and inspiration
tonight. And when tomorrow comes, keep the

vision intact, and the hope within hand;
be the light that dispels dark,
sing the song that offers praise for the
Christmas that is here.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*