

All is Bright

24 December 06
(Christmas Eve, 5:00, 6:30)

Bible passages:

Luke 2:1-20, Matthew 2:1-2, Isaiah 9:2 (all TEV)

Sermon nugget: In lighting candles on Christmas Eve, we are symbolizing the hope that continues to be born into the world

A man by the name of Donald Dugan tells a story about his youngest daughter, age 4, and their attempts to share with Christmas story with her so she'd know the real meaning of the day. She had a wonderful Christmas, complete with lots of presents and new toys. A few days after Christmas, her parents overheard her talking to her older sister about what a great thing Christmas is, and said, "I sure hope Mary and Joseph have another baby."

Here we are once again on Christmas Eve, and we're celebrating the birth of a baby. We may tend to think, like that four-year-old, that this is just a preamble to the real part of Christmas—the presents, the parties, the time with family and friends. After all, why shouldn't we? Many of us have spent a lot of time and energy in the course of this season just getting ready for the big day.

But I think it's important for us to remember the real reason we celebrate this day. It all has to do with the story we have heard in many different forms—the story of the birth of a baby, and the deep joy and hope that event brings to every family, including our family here at The Garden.

Just think what happens as a family eagerly awaits the birth of a child. Along with all the many preparations everyone does to get ready, there's plenty of time for dreaming and imagining just what that baby will be like. We begin to wonder what he or she will look like, and how they'll be as a baby. We might even get as far as envisioning what his or her life will be like when they're 5, or 10, or 15, or 20. I doubt that many of us can get much beyond that, because even if our kids are adults, it's still hard to get used to that ideal!

Along with all the dreaming and imagining, there's a deeply imbedded hope—hope that this child's life will be good and healthy, that the future will be bright and exciting. We hope that we'll be good parents, and be able to nurture the children as they grow, knowing full well that we'll make plenty of mistakes along the way. We hope their world will be peaceful and calm, that they will experience love in their lives, and that the fondest dreams will come true. There's so much wrapped up in the coming of a child that it's almost impossible to capture it all.

We have to assume that that same kind of hope and expectation surrounded the birth of the baby Jesus. As I've said before, the stories that we have in the Bible differ

greatly from one another, and can't be taken as factual accounts. We do know from history that a child named Jesus was born into rather poor circumstances, and the Bible writers try to give us an idea of the poverty and displacement that little family faced. And yet, even in that kind of setting, a mother and father experience incredible joy and hope.

Apparently their hope was contagious, because we read in another version of the story that there were visitors from the east, ones we often refer to as the wise men, who studied the stars and came to see the child. We don't know if that actually happened or not, but it is safe to assume that astrologers might have interpreted the bright twinkling of a distant star as a hope-filled sign. All I know is that I feel as sense of joy, awe and wonder when I look heavenward on a starlit night, and see even a little bit of the magnificent beauty that surrounds us, so why wouldn't they?

Witnessing the birth of a baby, seeing the light of a star are signs of a hope that can brighten an often-darkened world. When we watch the news, or read the paper, sometimes it's a little hard to catch a glimpse of any kind of possibility for hope, and yet, there are stories like the Christmas story that offer a pinpoint of light in an otherwise bleak and dark.

Even before Thanksgiving, **Tom Ehrich** wrote a column with the heading, "We can use the spirit of Christmas without delay," and he was talking about the need we all have to see a hint of hope in our world. Ehrich wrote, "**We need hope. Real hope. The hope that only faith can give. Not tinselly dreams of perfect gifts, but hope that family, friends and giving still matter.**"

Actually the hopes he expressed so eloquently really reflect some of my own. For example, **Ehrich** wrote that he hopes **wisdom, common sense and decency will prevail**, and that greed not be the final word. He hopes that **"God's dream of oneness and mercy will reclaim human hearts."**

He said that he hopes families will take the time **"to contemplate the blessings of family, our shared need for warmth and love, and the promise of light in the darkness."** He offered one last example of what he hopes for in this season, **and he says, "I hope that we can declare a 'Christmas truce' in our warfare between genders, between sexual orientations, among religions and among races."**

One of the early prophets, Isaiah, offered a word of hope to those he heard him. He said,

**"The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.
They lived in the land of shadows,
but now light is shining on them."**

Tonight, we have once again heard the story of the birth of that baby so long ago, and hopefully, we are being filled

with a sense of hope and joy that is not fleeting, but lasts for a lifetime.

Father James Keller, the founder of the Christophers, once wrote these words, "Hope lights a candle instead of cursing the darkness." In just a few moments, we will do exactly that--lighting candles, candles that symbolize the hope that God brings to us in Christmas.

Lighting Candles.

CLOSING:

As we leave here tonight, I hope and pray that the light, love and hope of Christmas fill our hearts, and give us peace.
Amen.