

Sermon/Meditation Christmas Eve 2015 Winsted UMC

The Christmas story in the gospel of Luke states, "In the days of Herod the king...Caesar Augustus, Quirinius..." These names probably mean little to most of us, but gospel-writer Luke wanted us to know that this was a very bad time for the people of Israel. The Roman rule was harsh. The Jewish puppet governor was ruthless. The religious authorities were weak. .. Charles Dickens began his classic novel, A Tale of Two Cities, with the opener: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." God's Son was born into what seemed at the time for the people of Judah the "worst of times."

Perhaps today, tonight, we are in "the best of times and the worst of times." Lots of people in our nation have been making big money and the experts declare that unemployment numbers are now very low, but at the same time most of us know persons who are not making it, who are struggling to get through a month. As our politicians duke it out, hoping to become our next President, serious threats like gun violence, terrorism, pollution and global warming keep on challenging our lives. The New York Times is full of advertisements for jewelry and expensive gadgets, but an article in the midst of the glitz tells of the terrible suffering of the refugees, where there is no room for people struggling to find a place to survive... Even today, we have heard of troubles and tragedies.

The best of times and the worst of times. Technology leaps along, enticing us with new gadgets and possibilities. But though we can carry sophisticated computers around in our hands and look forward to cars that will essentially drive themselves, our relationships seem no clearer. Our youth get hooked on drugs. Our families break. Our bodies get cancer. And many of us feel, deep inside, discomfort with ourselves and with our life, wondering if anybody would love us if they really knew us, wondering how much longer we can hold things together in our lives... When the hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" speaks of "the hopes and fears of all the years," we can touch both inside ourselves... Hopes and fears...

To us is born a Savior, the love of God given to us in a form we can touch: human life...

In his poem, "Bethlehem Now," Ron O'Grady offers perspective on what God has offered us through the Bethlehem birth:

*Every homeless refugee  
desperate for a bed  
for a night  
understands the agony  
of Joseph  
at Bethlehem*

*Every frightened  
teenage girl  
pregnant and lost  
comprehends  
the bewilderment  
of Mary*

*Every executive  
trying to reconcile  
commercial realities  
with moral imperatives  
identifies with  
the local innkeeper*

*Every working person  
in a daily routine  
wakening to a sudden  
reverence for life  
experiences the awe  
of the Judean shepherds...*

*Bethlehem speaks many tongues. (Edited from *The Song of Jesus*, 1984)*

The good news of Jesus the Christ is this: In the midst of the worst possible moments of our lives, God gives us tonight's story.

Christmas is our festival of hope in the face of whatever would drag us down - in our lives or in the life of the world. Tonight, our hearts are invited to be renewed by the story of the Bethlehem birth and to find hope in the songs, not those cacophonies spewed out by a desperate or over-confident world, but the songs of faith that no matter what, God can and will bring us "home."

We need not fear, we need not grow weak through despair... We need instead to sing to God, and to go on in life trusting the promise that God is with us.

Emmanuel, God is with us, for the best of times and for the worst... This story has been given for YOU, for us, for all who yearn for peace. May the presence of our Savior - Immanuel - renew our stories. Amen.