

THE IN-BETWEEN: CALM AND CHAOS

Isaiah 9:2-7

Intro

We live in the in between.

The promises are clear enough. Not that they provide a whole lot of specificity, but even in their vagueness, there is an understanding that hope will manifest itself as light which will allow justice to reign, and reign forever.

And we've seen glimpses of these promises come to fruition. Yes, we certainly read about it in scripture, but we also have those moments when we encounter it in our lives: love is shared, support is felt, care is provided (maybe even from the most unexpected of locations).

But then we know, and I mean that we really know, that too often these experiences are more glimpses than anything else. There is anger and distrust; there is illness and death; there are simply too many examples of bad and even horrific things happening to good people (and again, while we are certainly able to bear witness to these realities from a distance...there are way too many days when we are able to experiences variations on this theme at a very close proximity).

Again, we live in the in-between.

An important thing about our scripture lessons is that they reflect this experience: they don't try and make us feel like what we are experiencing is a life that offers only the diminished blessings of God, as opposed to the full boat. Make sure that you hear that in the opening verse for when you do, the promises that are made become promises that still pertain to each of us, even as we navigate through the in-between.

The scripture reads this way.

Isaiah 9:2-7

² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³ You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴ For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-20

Intro

When we hear this passage, like the passage from Isaiah, it can be real easy to simply dwell in the fulfillment of the promise. We hear these words, we sing hymns like 'Silent Night', we share candle light from one to another, and we think of calm, and peace, and justice that is breaking over the horizon.

And all of that is true!

But that's not all of it.

Yes, there is the justice that has been born into the world, but that necessarily means that there was injustice.

Yes, there is peace, but all of us know who have ever raised a child that peace tends to be in short supply, and that doesn't even speak to the rest of the story that we know in regard to Jesus life.

And calm? Yes, there is calm (not only promised, but realized as well)...and it exists right alongside chaos.

So as we gather here on this Christmas Eve, which Christmas are you embracing? The one that is posterized by the world we have created (where calm, peace, and justice are the only residents), or the one that is actually spoken of: the one where calm exists beside the chaos? The scripture reads this way.

Luke 2:1-20

2In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in

her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

'The In-Between: Calm and Chaos'

The Children's Christmas Pageant: you either love it, or well, let's say it's not your favorite.

I grew up in a church community where the Pageant was a full on play. There were try outs and there was planning by adults that began not long after the previous Easter. Now in reality, it was probably nothing like that, ...but as a kid, that's what it felt like.

Rehearsals? Oh yeah, there were practices that began right after Halloween with rehearsals that would last the whole day once we got close to the performance date. Now in reality it was probably quite a bit different than that...but as a kid that's what it felt like.

And then there was the actual performance where the spot light would be rolled out into the balcony to be able to shine upon all the appropriate players, and if you happened to forget what you were to say next, there was always someone just off stage to be able to feed you your line. Now while there was a spot light and someone to feed you lines, the reality was that it was still a little Christmas pageant in a country church.

That's what I grew up with. There was order, it was calm, it might have even been peaceful.

The reality that now exists has families that are so busy with ... everything, that the possibility of getting children together for multiple practices, well, yeah, not happening.

So what does that create? The no rehearsal Christmas pageant!

I tend to think of it like this: directed chaos. Because it's not exactly organized...it's more chaos that is encouraged to go in a particular direction. We were able to hold such a pageant this past Sunday (like we have been able to do the last couple of years as well) and once it got going (with all the folks in attendance invited and encouraged to take on a roll that they felt connected to) there were people all over the place.

Do you know what it was not? Calm.

But somewhere, in and through all of its chaotic-ness (not a word but you get my meaning!) people were able to be reminded of the promises that were made, the truths that are eternal, and the calm that does exist, just like it did when it first took place, in the in-between when Jesus was actually born.

I know, on one level that statement feels sacrilegious (especially with all of the imagery that we have attached to the Nativity scene itself: beautiful starlight, both animals and newborn quiet and still, everything being postcard perfect).

But the reality is not the calm and serene that Hallmark and all of the songwriters have grafted on to what took place in that little backwater town o so long ago.

The reality existed in the in-between: in between calm and chaos; in between joy and sadness; in between care and neglect.

Yes, there was the calm that starlight is able to afford, but it exists not that far away from the chaos that darkness brings upon visitors to a community that is not their own.

Yes, there is the joy of knowing that your newborn is healthy and it resides not that far away from the sadness that his birth came in a strange place, with no family around to support the young couple (o, that's right, they weren't even married yet, so they were doing their best to hide the reality of this pregnancy from the rest of the community that they had grown up in).

Yes, there is the care in that the innkeeper was able to provide (probably out of pity), but that care came in the neglectful form of staying in the animal outcropping...with the animals wondering why their space was being infringed upon by these strangers.

The presence of God does not mean that everything is calm.

The absence of God does not mean that everything resides in chaos.

No, God exists with humanity, with us, in the in-between, right here, right now, tonight, and that is regardless of whether this moment feels more like calm or chaos. God is here, and our scriptures, our hymns, the lighting of candles all remind us that the calm, the peace, the justice of God does manifest itself, even though there are many days when chaos seems to be the norm.

Can we handle that?

And I don't just mean that from a, 'look, this is the way it is so we have to deal with it whether we like it or not' sort of way.

I mean, are will willing to faithfully abide with a God who walks with His people through the good days and the bad; yes, providing support and care but not in such a way where the difficulties of life are whitewashed away?

Are you willing to trust that you are cared for and loved even in days when it feels like the chaos is starting to win?

Isaiah had to. Mary had to. Joseph had to. The shepherds had to. Jesus absolutely had to. And so do we.

This doesn't mean that there are moments of doubt and worry, but even that doubt and worry can be set in the context of trusting in God's presence with us.

I don't know if you have noticed it, but there was a house a couple of blocks over who decided that two and a half weeks before Christmas was a great time to rip the siding off of their place. Aluminum was literally flying off the walls and the hammering...never...stopped...o...the...hammering.

And yes, this house is the one that my family and I live in. Here's the thing about all of that chaos taking place all around your house as you get ever closer to Christmas: you can't decorate the outside...at all.

You know what happens to a candle in a window when there is hammering on the other wall...down goes the candle! And with all the stuff taking place outside, there was no hanging of garland or wreaths: it would have just gotten in the way of all the work that was being done.

Well, as that chaos was washing over us, we walked through the dining room one evening to see three little lighted trees and a blinking star hung from the limb of one of the pine trees out in the middle of the yard. It was just this simply little mismatched offering from a few friends and neighbors...and it was absolutely perfect. A moment of calm that made its appearance shining bright even as so much chaos existed.

Illustration fill?

We exist in the in-between where so much of life is flying all around us in ways that are anything but calm and serene...and yet the presence of God invites us to see the light which reminds us that there are eternals that the darkness cannot, that darkness will not overcome.

Whether you gather in this evening in a state of calm or in a state of chaos, please know, please have faith that the God whom we worship here this evening abides with you, encouraging you in small ways and large ways alike to see beyond the Christmas card to the in-between that existed even on that first Christmas day. See it and see how, even in-between the calm and the chaos of those first Christmas moments, how the presence of God was always there.

The same is true today.

We exist in-between calm and chaos and God is here with us, encouraging us to live in faith through it all.

After Sermon Prayer

Lord, wherever we may feel life has led us this Christmas Eve, whether it be calm or chaos, You abide with us. Lord, help us to trust that, have faith in that so that we might be able to follow You especially on the days that lean toward anything but peaceful. On this Christmas Eve, remind us of Your presence and how You are always there. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.