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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
December 24, 2014  
Luke 2:1-14  
John 1:1-5

### **“Light in the Darkness”**

Last Sunday after church one of the members here remarked to me that “Just One More” would be a good title for a Christmas Eve sermon, because it seems in those last few days leading up to tonight, there’s always just one more of something – one more present to buy; or one last thing to mail; or one last run to make to the grocery store. Maybe when you get home you have one more present to wrap. I know I do!

But for the next hour, at least, what needed to be done has been done and what hasn’t been done can wait on this, the most beautiful and mysterious night of the year when the world stops to listen, one more time, to an old story everyone knows so well.

And what a story it is! It’s the most miraculous yet mind-boggling story . . . which is probably one of the reasons we love it so much.

Just think about it, we have a young girl, probably in her mid-teens, who is visited by an angel who tells her she will give birth to a king, “the Son of God,” the angel says, “and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Is it any wonder Mary replied to the angel, “How can this be?”

And yet, happen it does – but not the way we would imagine it. The birth takes place in a manger, because there is no room at the inn. The only witnesses are the animals in whose feeding trough the infant is laid, and a small band of shepherds from the nearby hills also come to watch. And there’s only a bed of straw and a swaddling cloth for the baby Jesus.

These are not ideal conditions for God to enter the world, are they? And yet, how often do we forget that? In some respects, we’ve heard the story so many times that its impact has been dulled and diminished through the years. I know that’s

happened to me. How often have I read this and become too sentimental? Too many times. Too many times.

This year, though, when I heard the words read by someone else, I noticed some things about the story that I hadn't in a long time. I heard the word Syria . . . and thought about how much that country has been in the news this year . . . nearly 6 million Syrians have been displaced because of conflict there. Joseph and Mary were displaced because of the census the emperor demanded to be taken – forced from their current home to the town of their birth, they lived according to the whim of their ruler. In so many ways, they were refugees, too.

I thought about how this old, old story is still so current; in Syria and elsewhere people are still forced from their homes and are still living under oppressive regimes. In our own country young women still give birth in less than ideal circumstances; and too many families make their homes in makeshift situations, we just don't call them mangers or stables anymore.

Luke may begin his story with the words, "In those days," but he tells a story about today: of a census and taxes and authoritative orders and political pronouncements; of time shaped by business as usual and history defined by those in positions of authority. Luke tells a story about today – which I think is one of the reasons this story resonates so deeply with us. Because no matter who we are, we find ourselves in it – those of us who have found ourselves displaced, either from our home or maybe our job or maybe a marriage or maybe our family, are in the story; those of us who have been refugees – oh, not in the same way Mary and Joseph were, but maybe you've sought refuge at a meeting or a friend's house after finding yourself down on your luck – you're in the story; or maybe you're just trying to make your way in the world, squeezed by rising taxes and family demands, and weary from a variety of struggles. You're in this story, too.

Maybe you've even come tonight to hear this story but, like Joseph and Mary, things aren't going all that well for you, either. Maybe exhaustion, grief, loss, depression, or hurt characterize your mood this Christmas more than anything else so it's been hard for you to feel the "merry" in Merry Christmas. Maybe your heart just isn't in it. And you know what? That's OK.

Because the good news, no . . . the great news of this story, is that God's heart is. Because while this story is a real story that resonates so deeply, it's also a love

story – and those stories resonate, too. It's about the love Mary and Joseph had for each other. It's about their love for Jesus, love they didn't know they had until he was born – a common experience for all new parents. It's about the love Jesus had for his friends, his nation, his people, and for you and for me.

It's a universal story that people of great faith and no faith can relate to and understand. It's a hopeful story, a triumphant story, and a love story because this story promises us that God has come for you – no matter who you are, no matter what circumstance you find yourself in – God has come for you because God loves you.

The fourth Gospel describes it this way:

*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

That's how John's Gospel describes God coming into the world in Jesus Christ: as light shining in the darkness. And while there certainly seems to be no end to the darkness the world finds itself in this year, the good news, no -- the great news of Christmas is that love has been born among us, and nothing, not even darkness, shall ever separate us from it.

Christmas promises us that in the face of devastation there is reason to hope; that in the face of misery there is triumph, and in the face of hatred one can find love. That indeed, there really is no reason to fear, just like the angel said to Mary, because nothing is impossible with God.

Tonight we'll light our little candles with millions of other people around the world—a symbol of hope and love in the darkest season, a sign that Christ's love can break through anything, that nothing is impossible with God. That despite all the darkness in the world, there is always reason to hope.

A couple years ago, in the weeks before Christmas, a woman named Kathy found herself in the hospital, recovering from her second major surgery of the year, and hoping for a miracle. She remembered that a hospital is not a haven of quiet and peace and rest. She had a roommate who smoked in the bathroom and turned the TV on at all hours of the night. Across the hall an elderly woman cried out in pain every three minutes, day and night, night and day. A "code blue" sent emergency personnel and crash carts racing down the halls.

This is Kathy's story in her own words:

One night as I lay in my hospital bed, hooked up to so many machines I couldn't even move without help and close to tears from the pain and frustration, I heard a faint sound. Amidst the cries of pain, blaring TVs, and beeping monitors, I swore I heard a different type of sound altogether: a soft, sweet, gentle song. Then it was gone. Was I imagining things?

A few hours later, still awake and trying to block out the sounds of the woman wailing across the hall and the loud, angry voice of my roommate swearing on the telephone, I heard the strange, beautiful sound again. Could it possibly be? No, I must be hearing things.

When the nurse came in to check my vitals, I asked her: was it me? Or was there indeed a very different sound breaking through the harshness of that place?

"Oh," she said. "It's tradition here. Every time a baby is born in the nursery, they play Brahms' lullaby on the loudspeakers."

A lullaby on the loudspeakers. Floating through the harshness of those halls—a lullaby.

And right then, for the first time since I had come through the emergency room of that hospital, I smiled. I felt hopeful. I felt peace. Lullaby on the loudspeakers: a baby is born!

During the remaining time I spent in the hospital, I listened for the sounds of that lullaby. Amidst the horrible sounds of pain and misery that surrounded me, I strained to hear the sound of hope, of life, of new beginnings. Lullaby on the loudspeakers. A child is born.

And I thought of another lullaby, which broke into the sounds of the night nearly two thousand years ago, and in my heart, I heard the whisper of angels' wings:

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Do not be afraid, for over the sounds of people weeping and IVs beeping, over the cries of pain and suffering and sorrow, there is a heavenly lullaby: Do not be

afraid — I bring you good news, which is for all people. (The Presbyterian Outlook, 20 November 2006)

The good news, no -- the great news of Christmas is that love has been born among us, and nothing shall ever separate us from it.

Amen.

Lesson 4:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*