

God's Comfort and Joy
The Rev. Amy Spagna
Christmas Eve/Day 2025
Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14

The year was 1918. The Treaty of Versailles had been signed in June, marking the end of what was then known as the Great War. Europe was still a shambles after four years of brutal fighting which had left an estimated 8 million people dead. While the world was officially at peace, things were not all that peaceful. Soldiers returned home forever changed from their physical injuries and from the psychological terrors of being in close combat. The families of those who'd been killed were still coming to terms with those losses. And people who'd stayed at home, whether from necessity or not, were just generally feeling down after witnessing the horrors of war in such close fashion for perhaps the first time in recorded history. The Rev. Eric Milner-White, who was then the Dean of King's College, Cambridge, had returned from a stint as a chaplain in the British Army with a question smoldering in the back of his mind: What can the Church do not only to help lift people's spirits, but to help reinforce Christ's message of peace and goodwill toward all in this season?

The answer to the Dean's question was what we have come to know as the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols. If you're not familiar with it, it (re)tells the Christmas story through Scripture readings, anthems sung by the choir, and congregational carols. Over the nearly 100 years the BBC has broadcast the service via the radio, it, and the King's College Choir, have become a beloved part of Christmas celebrations worldwide. As a ten-year-old, embarking on my first year in the choir, I thought it was the best thing ever: we get to sing ALL THIS? I'm in!

In the years since, Lessons and Carols has become so much more. It connects me with certain places, and with certain people who aren't with us any more. That includes the choirmaster who taught us how not to be scared of doing the first verse of *Once in Royal David's City* by ourselves; that it's tidings of comFORT and joy, not comFERT and joy; and that, as the Bidding Prayer written by Dean Milner-White says, getting to make this place glad with our carols of praise is a privilege like none other. It's transcendent. That is, it is one of the things which makes the wall between heaven and earth about as close to transparent as it ever gets. Tonight, we get to see through that wall. Behind it is one of the most daring, and downright outrageous, things God has ever done, and that is to take on human flesh and blood. What it means for us is that, "We are living in the eternal now of God's coming among us. His name is Emmanuel – the God who is with us – who is made out of the same stuff we are and who is made out of the same stuff God is and who will not let either of us go."¹

Luke is the only one of the four gospel writers who says much of anything at all about all about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. It's from Luke that we get the familiar contours of the story: the baby born in a stable because there wasn't any more shelter available for his road-weary parents; the angels making an appearance in the sky in the hills outside of Bethlehem, where a bunch of shepherds just so happened to be out with their flocks to receive the news; and the shepherds going to town to see for themselves what the angels told them. It's the best news for anyone to receive, but most especially for anyone who is "down and out" in some way. A child has been born for us, and the zeal of the LORD of hosts has done this. This is hope, that things will

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Past Perfection." In *Home By Another Way* (Boston, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1999), 20-24.

get better, and that God has not left humanity to its own devices. Even in the worst of times, it's always been something we can hang onto as a source of both comfort and peace.

That hope, of divine accompaniment and intervention, also transcends human experience, regardless of the exact timing of its arrival. Some eight centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah probably wasn't thinking about this specific, once-in-history event of the Incarnation. Isaiah's time was also a grim one with a cloudy future. After they'd been invaded and many of their neighbors deported, the ancient Israelite people were left to wonder if God had abandoned them. It is probably not a stretch to imagine that many of them had lost all hope of being rescued, much less of returning home. What Isaiah tells them is essentially, "Don't give up. This thing of which I speak is as good as done." The light shining on those who walk in darkness is not just something which magically appears so we can see where we're going. It is a symbol, of a drastic change for the better, and also of God's very presence. It is meant to serve as a reminder that God is not done with God's people yet, not by a long shot. Don Saliers, a former professor at Emory University in Atlanta, puts it this way: "The divine humanity in the form of the child casts light in the midst of the darkness of such human captivities. This is a light that breaks the grip of death and nothingness. To speak of a light shining in the darkness is to speak of the divine persistence... [it] sounds the contrasts between deep darkness and the joyful light."²

² Don E. Saliers, "Theological Perspective: Isaiah 9:2-7." *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1 (Advent through Transfiguration)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 100.

In Jesus, the promise of deliverance has become a reality, now to be received as a gift. This newborn baby, for whom his next meal, a warm embrace from his parents, and perhaps a fresh diaper are, for now, the only things that matter, is how God bridges the gap between the world as it is, and God's desired ought to be. Just as it took Jesus time to grow into the man he was created to be, so too it has taken us time to get there. We are still waiting, and working, for that gap between the world as it is and God's world as it ought to be to be welded firmly shut. Jesus' very presence is the guarantee that someday, it will happen. That is the hope of the world to come, that in and through him, God's promise of salvation is made a reality. Only the zeal of the LORD of Hosts could do such a thing. It alone could lead Abraham and Moses out into the desert, give prophets of any generation the courage to speak the Truth to those who would hear it, and lead Mary and Joseph to go out onto a very thin limb indeed to bring Jesus into this world.

It is astonishing, that in the middle of all the not-so-good things that have plagued humanity throughout its history, and which continue right up to our time, that God would choose to do such a thing. But, it is important to remember that because God is God, promises are always kept. Humanity is NEVER abandoned. Even when it seems God may have left the building, God always shows up and does the unexpected thing to save us. What that next iteration of God intervening in the world might look like is hard to say. However, from our long history with God, we can trust that it will shine some sorely needed light into the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. "For a child has been born to us, a son given to us' authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is

named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6).