

December 24, 2023 - Christmas Eve

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, you made this holy night shine with the brightness of the True Light. Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence, and in the last day wake to the brightness of his glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.,

Hebrew Scriptures - Isaiah 62:6-12 (vss 10-11 quoted here)

Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.'

Gospel Reading - Luke 2:1-20

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

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, '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 Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When 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.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child was lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sermon

If you have hung around the church for any length of time (*any* church, that is), you will have heard the word "salvation," at one time or another, and probably several. It's a big deal for us. The word, in some form or another, appears over 500 times in the Bible.

What's interesting is that a vast majority of those appearances of the word are in what we call the "New Testament." There are actually very few times in which "salvation" appears in the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians usually call the "Old Testament"). Which means that "salvation" is not as central to the faith vocabulary of our Jewish friends and neighbours. It's there in Judaism; it's just that it isn't the primary emphasis for the Jewish tradition as it has become for Christian people.

As many of you know, I was involved with an inter-faith group when we lived in Kitchener, Ontario. It was an amazing group of people, and it was an amazing experience being involved with them. We would meet monthly, and the first part of every meeting was a discussion of some topic. We would

share what our various traditions taught or thought about that topic. We were not trying to convert anyone; we were simply sharing perspectives from our various points of view.

At one of these meetings, the topic was “salvation.” So Hindus talked about it, Muslims talked about it, Christians talked about it. One insight was pointed out by one participant is that there is no concept of salvation in Buddhism. They talk about “enlightenment,” but “salvation” is simply not present in Buddhist teaching or experience.

What I remember most clearly, however, was when Carol, one of the Jewish participants, spoke. One way that the Jewish tradition understands “salvation,” she said, is “space to be.” One is “saved” when one has “space to be.” An individual, a people, a tribe or or a nation is in a state of “salvation” when they have “space to be.”

This is one of the promises made in the passage from Isaiah which we read above.

The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, ‘See, your salvation comes.’

And, of course, Christians point to the birth of Jesus as the point where our **own** “space to be” becomes flesh and blood. Remember what the angels said to the shepherds.

*To you is born this day in the city of David a **Saviour**, who is the Messiah, the Lord.* [emphasis added]

“Salvation” is right there, at the heart of this story.

But in order to really hear this as a “salvation” event, we need to look at the way the story is actually told. And the way Luke tells this story, it starts by being anything **but** a “salvation” story!

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Caesar wants to register “the whole world.” Pretty arrogant, if you think about it.

Now, of course, the mentality of the time, the mentality of the Roman Empire, was that the Empire **was** the whole world, and least the **important** part of the world, and the rest of the world didn’t really count... unless they were conquered and made part of the Empire.

The sheer ambition, the totalitarian appetite, of that decree is pretty staggering. And of course, everyone in the Empire would understand that there was an implied “or else” attached to that statement.. “You **will** be registered. Period.”

And everyone would have understood the reason for this registration - taxes, of course. Taxes to continue to building the empire. Temples and monuments the Empire wanted to build, new armies to raise, new territory to conquer, new lands to take over, new people to absorb, new taxes to collect. Rinse and repeat.

Imagine the dislocation (literally!) which would have been caused by something like this. Because of the whim of the Emperor, everyone had to uproot their lives, and go to their hometown. Well, except for the women, of course, who had to go to their husband’s home town.

So Joseph and Mary obey the authoritarian regime, and hit the road, even though she is extremely pregnant.

And into this dictatorial reality, Jesus is born.

But it’s important to recognize that, the way the story is told, Jesus is outside Caesar’s control. Yes, he’s in the land claimed by the Empire, but he’s got no forwarding address. He’s an unknown nobody, born nowhere, completely off the radar of the Empire. Jesus’ birth is outside power, outside wealth, outside control, outside supervision; outside everything that makes the empire the empire, that makes the nation the nation, that makes the world the world. This is what “no room in the inn,” or “no room in the main room,” really means. God arrives, but beyond the reach of the emperor’s grasp. Off the grid, hidden with the animals, homeless, anonymous, incognito, unregistered, undocumented.

Outside of, and away from, and beyond all the stuff that makes up our lives, God creates “space to be” for Jesus to be born. The saving of the world begins outside the power structures of the world.

And to drive the point home, the story of Jesus' birth points us to the shepherds: outside of town, not following the emperor's edict to go home, living with the animals, anonymous, unregistered, undocumented. These ones, who are also living in lands claimed by the empire but outside of the control of the empire, are the ones who hear the song. God created "space to be" for the shepherds.

And I invite your attention to the artwork (to the right), which graced the cover of our Christmas Eve bulletin.

This was painted by an Indigenous artist who lives here on the South Shore named Mary Scott Mooswa. Having an image of an Indigenous mother and child is a reminder to us of several things.

It reminds us that Jesus was not white. He was a brown-skinned middle eastern child.

It reminds us that Jesus, like Mary Scott Mooswa, was a person of the Land, whose land was occupied and controlled by a foreign people.

It reminds us that Jesus came to give *all* people "space to be," not just people of the Empire, not just people who fit in with the Empire's assumptions of "normal," not just people who befit from being part of the nation's power structures.

It reminds us that we white Canadians, especially we white Canadian Christians, have not done a very good job of allowing our Indigenous neighbours "space to be." In fact, just the opposite. We have *taken* their space, and claimed it as ours. And we have too frequently done it in the name of Jesus.

The fact that Mary Scott Mooswa has gifted us with this painting is nothing less than astounding, because of how we have treated her people over the centuries. I am incredibly grateful that she consented to do this painting.

Because, precisely *in* this gift, and in the uncomfortable reminders that it gives us, I believe we can hear the voice of God, who calls us, especially as the church, to finally start giving up serving the interests of the Empire, and finally start sharing with others in our world, especially those outside the power structures, the salvation, the "space to be," that God has given.

Yes, we still live in land claimed by the Empire. But Jesus, by coming as he did and by being who he was, has provided us "space to be" *outside* of the Empire's awareness, outside of the Empire's control, outside of the Empire's mandate.

And we? Sometimes we are called to be the shepherds. We are called to be the ones who hear this amazing good news of salvation, this amazing news of "space to be," which is given for us and for everyone else. We are called to see the brown-skinned baby in the manger, and then tell everyone we meet that God has come to give all of us "space to be."

And sometimes, we are called to be Mary and Joseph, remaining quiet and pondering while others, like Mary Scott Mooswa, tell *their* stories and experiences of God's "space to be."

Christ is born, bringing "space to be" for all. Listen for the song, wherever it's coming from. Amen.



Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the promise of God revealed in the manger, we offer our prayers for all the world's children.

[*Short pause*]

A - God of salvation, you give the entire world "space to be." Remind us that we share this space with trees and animals, with oceans and rivers, with birds and fish, with every rock and every cloud.

Enable us to embrace our place *with* your good creation. God who continues to come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of salvation, the birth of Jesus is a sign of "space to be" for all who are forced from their homes by the powers that be: refugees, immigrants, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, the persecuted, the enslaved. May we always be willing to welcome the stranger, that we may share your salvation with those who most desperately need it. God who continues to come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of salvation, by the angel's proclamation to the shepherds, you welcome all who have been outcast, separated, dismissed, disinherited, removed from their land, cut off from their heritage. Open us to the voices of indigenous people, racialized people, sexualized people, and all who have had their identities denied. May we listen to their stories, learn what they have to teach, and walk together in the "space to be" which you promise to all. God who continues to come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of salvation, you call to your church through ancient stories, so that we may hear that same call speaking to us in our *current* situations. As you promise *us* "space to be," may we be willing to *share* "space to be" with the people around us. May we grow in our understanding of the salvation you assure, that we may be willing to move into new ways of being your people, trusting that, no matter where we are or where we go, you are with us. God who continues to come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of salvation, use us to provide "space to be" for those in our world who are sick, who are hungry, who are homeless, who see no reason to celebrate. Open our hearts to all who suffer, especially those we remember before you.

[*Long pause*]

God who continues to come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of salvation, you continue to create "space to be" outside of power, outside of wealth, outside of expectations. Send us outside, and to those who live there, that we may discover the "space to be" you are providing your world today. God who continues to come,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.