

Christmas Eve 5pm Family Service 2016 The New Song of Christ

We've been talking this advent about being made new by the incarnation and about how being made new enables us to sing a new song – the song of Christ. The birth of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Luke is a story with many dimensions and layers of meaning. For most of us, it's a familiar story. The challenge is to hear it again for the first time so that it's message can take root in our lives. That's why we used a video presentation of the Christmas story instead of the readings tonight. And it's why I'm going to tell a story tonight instead of "preaching a sermon." The central truth for tonight is this – that Immanuel (God with us) is also, and especially, God for us. Through faith in him, God has provided a way for us to be made new and to find in our hearts – however troubled at times they may be – the courage, the power, the Spirit to sing a new song – the Song that is the story of Christ in our lives.

So here goes...

This is the story of a young family, starting out in life. They are a fictional family, so they bear no intentional resemblance to any real family. Their story, however, may well resonate on many levels. Because while the details are fiction, the essence of the story is quite real. It's a story about how one woman's experience of a second birth changed her life, and her family's life. It's a story about being made new.

Let's start the story in the emergency room of the community hospital. Jurdene was eight and a half months pregnant when she started having difficulty breathing. Robert, not knowing what to do and fearing the worst, took his wife to the ER. Turns out that Jurdene's respiratory distress was related to her pregnancy and well ... all of a sudden what seemed like ordinary distress went urgent and she stopped breathing.

Two years before that Christmas eve in the ER, Robert looked up from what he was doing in his business to see this very attractive and delightful young lady looking at him with enchantment.

"May I help you?" he stammered out. She said, "I need help with this old laptop. I'm going back to school and this is all I have. It works OK but it's so slow. Can you help me?"

That conversation turned into many conversations and eventually led to a romance. Robert was quite a bit older than Jurdene when they met in his store that day. He had never married and was a good, kind and decent fellow. Robert owned a small IT business. He was established in the community and had done well for himself.

Jurdene, on the other hand, had something of a troubled past. Though young, she had been pregnant as a teenager. We'll come back to that. Jurdene struggled but finally did finish high school. She worked at it and eventually secured a job as a Nurse Assistant. Not much money but it kindled her desire to get more education and make helping people her life's goal.

Robert was the stable, responsible man she was looking for and Jurdene was the energetic woman he was looking for. They got married and shortly thereafter she became pregnant. They were delighted to say the very least. Well, at least at the beginning of the pregnancy.

For Robert, there never was a day that he was not thrilled with the prospect of being a father. His own father had died when he was very young and his mother never remarried. So being a father was, in his eyes, something he longed for. Jurdene, on the other hand, while loving Robert dearly and being excited about carrying their child, was of two minds. She loved Robert and wanted to be a mother. On the other hand, the closer it came to the time to deliver, the more anxious she grew.

The New Song of Christ (cont'd.)

Back to scene in the ER, the medical team went to work and got her breathing again. The staff doctor made the decision to induce labor and take the child early, fearing what might happen if they did not. He couldn't figure out why Jurdene stopped breathing and wondered what else might be going on that he didn't know.

You see, Jurdene was experiencing a sort of PTSD. That pregnancy she had as a teenager didn't end well. She thought she had put it behind her. But she had not. She didn't know it. No one knew it. The on-call doctor in the ER suspected something but he didn't know it either.

On this Christmas eve in the ER, the child was delivered without incident and turned out to be a healthy baby boy. Robert and Jurdene were on their way to being fabulous parents. Jurdene in short order started seeing a therapist to address the earlier trauma in her life. The family, at the recommendation of the therapist, started attending church.

Eventually, a year later, the family was in church on the next Christmas Eve and heard the story of the birth of the holy child of Bethlehem. They heard the story about how this child's birth would eventually bring healing and hope to all who would put their faith and trust in him and how he can bring peace to all troubled souls.

Jurdene, and her family, were made new by the birth of their son that night in the ER. Jurdene especially experienced a new spirit after the successful and healthy birth of her child; and she was made new by her ongoing therapy. Most importantly, they were all made new by the birth of God's Son – a birth that, as we let it, can take that which is wounded and broken and make it new.

Some things in life can mute the happiness in our hearts. Some things can even go so far as to take away our very desire to live. The incarnation of God's Son brings life to us and makes it possible for us to sing a new song. It is the new song of Christ, and it is the great gift of Christmas.

God grant to each of us this Christmas the blessings of being made new in and through his Son – the One who is God with us and the One who is God for us. Merry Christmas! Amen.

All Glory to God alone! Pastor Neil Buono

Christmas Eve 7pm 2016

We Sing a New Song

Grace and peace to you, dear friends in Christ. Our meditation for this evening's Christmas service draws together two texts – Psalm 96 and Isaiah 52. We continue our look at how the incarnation of Jesus Christ makes us new and how the coming of God in Christ makes it possible for us to sing a new song – the song of Christ.



In as much as a picture is worth a thousand words, I set before you two pictures this evening.

The picture on the left side of the screen is an artist's rendering of the Isaiah text – *“Break forth into singing you waste places (read, ruins) of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem.”* The ruins of Jerusalem aren't depicted as her buildings, but rather, her people. And herein lies the heart of how we might best understand this word of the Lord. The prophetic word is a call to God's people who are, in the words of the prophet, “ruins” – that is, people who are broken and in pieces.

That's quite a way to see ourselves. And yet, if we're honest, it **IS** an accurate picture of our lives. However much we might imagine that we have it together, the hard reality is something very different. More often than not, we are – as were the people to whom this word was first addressed – a holy mess!

Were it not so, the coming of God in Christ would be little more than a seasonal story told for the benefit of making us feel good. But we are a mess AND this is more than a seasonal story. It is THE story – the one told not to simply make us feel good but to bring us God's gift of salvation.

The prophet said, “the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.” The first Christmas was the fulfillment of God's prophetic Word that he has comforted and redeemed his people. The Lord did this, not another.

The coming of God in Jesus Christ is God's powerful act of redemption by which we are comforted and by which we, who are broken and in ruins, are made new!

The picture on the right side of the screen captures the words of the psalm and the heart of our Christmas celebration – we sing a new song because we sing of Christ's coming. This is the gift of salvation – that we are made new.

Are we still a holy mess? Yes, because on this side of eternity we are at once both sinner and saint, broken and whole. But because God, for the sake of Christ, declares us to be new we are no longer the mess we once were!

We Sing a New Song (cont'd.)

We are now in a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ and this relationship itself is God's gift of grace that makes us new – declared so by God that we might become in practice that which he has gifted us to be.

The great gift of Christmas, the incarnation of God's Son, is God's powerful declaration that he sees our need and has acted to save us. However difficult and broken our lives may be at times, such difficulty and brokenness are no longer all there is.

Because now, there is hope.

Because now, there is comfort.

Because now, there is Christ!

Therefore the prophet declares, "*Break forth into singing*" and the psalmist declares, "*Oh, sing to the Lord a new song!*" The old is gone. The new has come. Indeed. In Christ, it is a new day.

God grant to each of us this Christmas the blessings of being made new in and through his Son – the One who is God with us and the One who is God for us. Merry Christmas! Amen.

All Glory to God Alone! Pastor Neil Buono

Christmas Eve 10pm Candlelight Service 2016

The New Song of Light

Grace and peace to you, dear friends in Christ. Our meditation for this evening's candlelight service draws from the appointed Gospel reading from John. We note especially these words: *"In him was life, and that life was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it."* In the name of our Lord, Amen.

We are in the dark season now. It's winter. The days are their shortest, and light is hard to come by. For many, this is the time when Seasonal Affective Disorder kicks in. The acronym, SAD, expresses the disorder well – it is characterized by emotional and physical depression.

For many, Christmas is itself not a time of joy but a time of sorrow – sorrow because of the memory of those now gone. Winter just sort of goes with all of that. It is cold. It is dark. And it is often overwhelming. Not really a time for songs of joy.

I could go on and on. Winter is a metaphor for our life's journey under the shadow of the cross. It is cold. It is often lonely. And it is always dark. Where, we ask, is the light?

It is in the Christmas Gospel – with its promise and assurance of light. It is a word of extraordinary hope, comfort and peace. It is God's gift of grace to us in our winter journey – a gift to help us weather the inevitable challenges of living in the season of darkness.

The birth of Jesus Christ reminds us that even though this is a dark world and often a world of pain and sorrow, of suffering and sadness, of dying and death, it is nevertheless still God's world.

It is the world into which our Lord came not to condemn or destroy it, but to redeem and enlighten it. The birth of our Savior is God's strong declaration that God is not willing to let the winter darkness have the last word.

The birth of our Savior is God's powerful action to shine the healing light of his grace into our lives – a healing light that leads us to hope, peace and life.

It is no historical accident that the one who came as the light of the world into our dark world came without the divine light of his glory. In Christ, God veiled his light. There is the one extraordinary glimpse we recall as the transfiguration, but otherwise his light was covered. Why we might ask, if God came to enlighten our world, did God not shine gloriously?

Because in his mercy and grace, God came not to condemn the world but to save the world. His glorious light would have consumed this dark world – and all of us – were it not for Christ. Know this – when he comes again he WILL come in glory to judge the living and the dead. But not now. The incarnation is God's light coming into the world not to judge it, but to heal it.

And God's Light brings healing through making the darkness His own. WE would be overcome, but not Christ. John tells us clearly, "the darkness did not overcome the light." God, in love, stepped into the darkness and overcame IT. That's what the cross and the resurrection are all about.

The birth – the incarnation – is God's light in the world to transform us so that we can stand in the darkness and not be overcome by it either. God's light, which shines this night in Bethlehem, shines every night and every day, into the darkness of our lives here and now. And where God's gift of light is present, there also is God's gift of life.

The New Song of Light (cont'd.)

Dear friends, I do not think we can tell ourselves too many times or too often, that in Christ, we have the light of Christ to lead us, to guide us, to protect us, to comfort us, to heal us, to enlighten us; and – as we have been focusing on this Advent and Christmas season – to make us new and enable us to sing the new song of Christ.

God grant to each of us the gift of his blessed light in our lives today, and every day, as we journey through the dark season. Amen. Merry Christmas!

All Glory to God Alone! Pastor Neil Buono