

“A TIME OF FULFILLMENT”

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55

Fourth Sunday in Advent (December 20), 2009

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

These oft-quoted words are the words that begin the book, *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*, by Charles Dickens and I repeat them to you today because they are words that are true about the times in which we live - just as they were true in Dickens' day, and indeed in the days of Mary and Joseph.

It was, and is, the best of times, and it was, and is, the worst of times.

Today as we celebrate the fourth Sunday of Advent I want to ask you all to remember that in these times there is much to celebrate, and that this is always true, that there is always much to celebrate, no matter how bad the times are and no matter how much worse we think the times may become.

The Christmas message is that prophesy has been fulfilled - God is with us – our Lord Emmanuel, and no matter how many Grinches try to steal our Christmas, no matter how many negative forces may try to rob us of the hope, the peace, the love and the joy that God intends for us, nothing can take from us that which is good, and true, and pure, and lovely, and gracious.

Jesus was born in a world like ours, in fact, in a world even worse than ours. It was a world in which tyranny ruled everywhere, where poverty and hunger and suffering was overwhelming for all but a very few.

When you look at the time of Jesus realistically you might easily think that it was the height of foolishness for Mary to sing for joy to God as she did: what after all was there for her to celebrate but some strange dream, some vision; and a pregnancy that had almost led to her being divorced by her fiancé Joseph?

The times were bad - and everyone knew that they were going to get worse. This was as plain to see as Caesar's armies and Herod's tax-collectors, and the crosses that so often appeared along the roads and highways.

What was there to celebrate in Judea 2000 years ago?

What is there to celebrate today, in 2009, here in Willmar, Minnesota?

People we love get sick and die, our jobs and our security are continually threatened, our children's futures are uncertain, the economy is in the tank, unemployment is at an all-time high, and around the world millions are dying in wars and from hunger and disease.

It was then, and it is now, the worst of times.

But my friends, it was then, and it is also now, the best of times.

I say that because the same Spirit that took hold of Mary, and conceived within her a child, is here today.

I say that because just as the Spirit, working in Mary, brought forth life and light to the world in the person of Jesus – so it still brings forth life and light to the world through its working in us and in those around us.

That light and that life cannot be destroyed - no matter how bad the times are. In fact that light and that life often appear stronger the worse things get in the world.

The Grinch who stole Christmas in the Dr. Seuss story, tried to steal Christmas by taking from the villagers all their Christmas decorations, all their trees, all their presents, all their food, all the exterior things that they enjoyed so much - and yet Christmas continued despite this theft because the villagers had Christmas inside them.

And as it was with the villagers in Who Town, so it was with Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zechariah, and so it is and so it can be today with us. So it should be for us today. Now is the time of fulfillment.

People have been saying for years that Christmas is not like it used to be.

These people, these griches, keep on trying to steal Christmas by looking at the bad things and forgetting that good things exist too, and that good things exist not in some kind of splendid isolation, but in the midst of all that is, and that goodness shines brightest in those places where it is most needed - right next to the bad things - indeed - often right in the middle of them.

Where is Christmas today as it used to be? Where it has always been - among the humble and lowly, with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and with those moved by the Spirit of love, the spirit of Christ.

It can be found in the overflowing box of items donated to the women and children who are living at the Shelter House. It can be found in the birthday bags that will be donated to the Food Shelf to help children have a special birthday party. It can be found in the mittens and hats and scarves on the tree downstairs. It can be found in baskets that were filled with goodies and delivered to friends of the church – and in the joy experienced by those who received the baskets. It can be found in Palestinian Christians preparing to celebrate while surrounded by war. It can be found in those who shop for and prepare and serve the food for the Community Meal. And it can be found in the guests who come to share in that meal.

Where is Christmas to be found?

It is to be found too in those cartoonists, who give us in the Saturday Funnies some beautiful messages to remind us what Christmas is about -

In *Family Circus* for example - where Billy, after wandering through various stores and seeing signs that say "Don't forget Christmas Candy; don't forget wrapping paper, don't forget to visit Santa, don't forget last minute gifts," and so on, goes home and draws a picture of Mary, Joseph and Jesus and the star and writes on it "Don't forget."

And it is found in *B.C.* - where Johnny Hart treats us to a poem that reminds us of this fulfillment of prophesy:

In olden days lost souls besought sweet solace from the gloom,
of all the sin that man had wrought, in conquest of his doom,
and then one night a ray of hope shone down from one bright star,
and in that morn, a king was born, who loves us as we are.

It is found in Charles Schultz's *Peanuts* when a frustrated Charlie Brown looks to the sky and cries, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" and Linus steps into the spotlight and recites those familiar words: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

"That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown." That's what Christmas is all about, people of God. Christmas is found wherever there is caring and sharing, and caring and sharing my friends exists all around us. Nothing and nobody can steal this from us, even when, and if, we live in the worst of times.

God chose the oddest of ways for this prophesy to come to pass: God's son was born in Bethlehem, one of the least of the towns of Judah, and he was born to be the servant of many, rather than to be a king. He spent his time with ordinary people, and he healed and he helped those that others ignored, and he was killed.

But his life was not destroyed. The prophesy continued to be lived out. He rose, and he bestows upon all who would receive it his spirit, the spirit of love, and of hope, the spirit of joy, and of peace, and this makes Christmas what it is...it makes this the best of times, for those who believe.

The spirit of Jesus - the spirit of Christmas - is alive this year everywhere.

So many - so very many - are giving birth to hope, to love, to joy and to peace in this way. So many are giving birth to Jesus Christ.

This Christmas ponder the events around you

- consider what God has done

- consider God's very great promises to us

- accept God's commands
- act on the promises

and you will continue to see the fulfillment of prophesy.

AMEN!