

Message: Let us have hope

Merry Christmas!

This is a night of welcome. It's a time for greeting those we haven't seen in a while and for opening our hearts to those we haven't met. Just as Mary and Joseph didn't hold back, welcoming those they didn't know, we all are welcome here tonight. That's because we're gathered here in the presence of God and all of creation to be filled with wonder and awe at God's glorious love.

Welcome by the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Thank you for coming. This is a safe place. It's a place where we can come without fear. In the holy presence of God, it doesn't matter what our national origin, language, gender, age, income, social status, sexual orientation or faith is. This is a place where we can know and experience God's grace, just like that humble stable in Bethlehem.

We're a people living in darkness.

The world is not at peace tonight. There are those who prefer anarchy to order, conflict to calm, lies to truth, their will to caring for others.

We live in a world where money, power and consumption have great influence, causing many people to live in desperation and depression.

We live in a world where people are devalued and dehumanized for the sake of popularity. We live in a fallen creation, exploited and polluted for the sake of the few.

Some of us are like the shepherds, pushed to the margins of life. Others are like the innkeeper, full of their own interests, unable to respond to the needs of others. Many of us are unaware of the breadth and depth of the sin that surrounds us. We all have a deep hunger and thirst for something more than what we see and what we experience: the trauma and failures of life. Our spirits cry out within us: God save us!

So we gather together.

We come together this evening as pilgrims on a spiritual journey.

We hear God's call. We all respond, even if we aren't sure why we're here or if we came because it's expected by our family or friends. We're drawn by God's Spirit because, deep down, we sense something. We may not be sure what it is. God's presence is still and quiet, just like the countryside where the shepherds were on the night when Jesus was born.

This is a place of joy.

We aren't gathered here tonight because of an old book. We aren't gathered here because it's a great building. We aren't gathered here because our friends came. We aren't even gathered here for the cool candlelighting and music. The reason we're gathered here is because of one, very special person: Jesus Christ. Jesus was born to change the world. He did. Jesus gives us hope. Deep down, that fills us with joy.

Jesus came as a sign.

"When Mary's baby was born, calendars were renumbered. The heavens applauded and a new star appeared in the sky. The angels sang and shepherds came running into town. Wise men brought gifts and frightened King Herod when Mary's baby was born in a manger.

When Mary's baby walked this earth, people came from miles around to sit at his feet and hear wisdom that could only come from God. They brought the sick, the lame, the blind, the deaf and those who were troubled in their minds. Jesus fed their spirits and healed them. The winds and seas obeyed him because he was Emmanuel, God with us. Demons trembled and ran away when Mary's baby walked on this earth.

When Mary's baby died, we thought hope died. Even the earth was grieved, the sun hid its face and refused to shine, and the ground quaked. Graves opened up and the dead walked around while Roman soldiers confessed Mary's baby, Jesus, as the Son of God."¹

When Mary's baby rose, we found an empty tomb. Hiding in fear, Jesus appeared among us and restored our peace. We touched his scared hands, wept tears of joy, were restored as his followers and given assurance even when we doubted. Mary's baby rose from the dead to save us and show us the way to eternal life.

Now, Mary's baby lives again and is seated in heaven. Mary's baby lives again and is praying for you. Mary's baby lives again and makes it possible for you to have hope and joy!

The impossible happened in the most glorious way on that Bethlehem night so long ago. I invite you to turn to those beside you. Wish them a Merry Christmas. And say, "May God fill you with hope and joy." *Amen*

¹ Author: Safiyah Fosua. www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/finding-joy-in-unexpected-places (modified)

Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV)

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness -
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Luke 2:1-10 (NRSV)

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 inn.

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.”