



The Place Hope Takes God

TEXT
Luke 2:1-7

November 12, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It's odd to read this story just a few weeks after Halloween, and just a day after Veterans Day, and before the Thanksgiving feasts have been prepared. But it struck me as the right passage to read on this day when we bring our pledge cards.

Mary had a baby. Every child is a miracle, but the miraculous reality of this baby is that he was born because God wanted to live in human history. Most babies, when they are born, they come as the fulfillment of their parents' dreams. I still remember the look on Carol's face the first time she told me we were pregnant. It was news we had been waiting for. It's not always that way, I know. And for more than we realize, it is news that proves to be painfully illusive. I know that as well.

Often, when a child is born, it is the fulfillment of parental hope. But the birth of Jesus had little to do with any hopes that Mary and Joseph may have had. They were both quite surprised to be part of this. No, Jesus was born as a fulfillment of God's hope.

Jesus is born because God wants to live where you live. Your life now — as you are, where you are — matters to God, so much so that God chooses to

dwell in the human story. The theologians call it the doctrine of the incarnation. It wasn't enough for God to be in glory; God had to become human to be with you. In Jesus Christ, God has come to us.

July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong, by every report a calm and cool-headed astronaut, stepped on the surface of the moon. Many across the nation watched with Walter Cronkite. Cronkite said that he had thought about this moment for months, and of the eloquent things to say. But when it happened, he just took off his broad-rimmed glasses, shook his head and said, "Boy..." He was speechless.

I have a vague memory of watching it happen. I was 9 years old. My dad took me out in the backyard, and we looked up at the moon. I honestly don't remember if it was that night or another night. He said, "Neil Armstrong is up there. Would you like to go someday?"

"Sure," I said. There was something of that moment that spoke to the adventurous spirit, the curious spirit in us.

Why am I reminding us of that remarkable moment? The incarnation did not happen because God was curious or adventurous. God came to be part of human

history in the life of Jesus Christ, not to explore but to be with us. It was love — a love for this world as it is, and a hope for how his love would make it.

What I am saying is I think Jesus was born because the place hope takes God is here, with us.

Yesterday we had a Session retreat. It was a great day. I am so grateful for the leaders you have chosen to lead our church family. Rodger Nishioka showed a video of a little 6-year-old boy from Savannah, Georgia, named Jaden Hayes. Before he was in the first grade, both of his parents died. He is an orphan at age 6, living with a guardian.

Jaden decided that there was too much sadness in the world, and he was going to do something about it. So he got his guardian to buy some rubber ducks and some plastic dinosaurs ... kids' toys. He asked her to take him downtown, and he looked for people who were not smiling. Then Jaden walked up to them and handed them a toy. "This is for you, just to make you smile." He gave them mostly to adults.

Men and women, people of all races — some polished and put together and some rough around the edges — he gave them a toy just to make them

smile. And they did, when they didn't cry at the power of a 6-year-old giving love with nothing expected in return.

It was the place hope took Jaden: into his world, to spread a little joy, to spread a little care, to spread a little love. His heart is still broken, and many of the adults he handed a plastic toy to were no doubt carrying burdens he couldn't imagine. But for a moment, he let them see that as long as there is love, hope does not die.

I think that is what we are doing today. We are bringing our pledge cards, and together, in ways we cannot do on our own, we are letting this community see what hope looks like.

And the world needs this hope. The world is filled with youth who struggle with self-destructive self-images, and with folks where every connection is a Snap or an Insta, but are awash in loneliness. I look around this room, and I look around our community and know the burden of broken hearts and dashed dreams that are everywhere.

And then I remember there was a baby born in Bethlehem to show us the love of God, and the way the power of God's love can make this world. So how could we not hope? When we live out our hope, it makes a difference.

I watched the World Series, or most of it, even though I didn't really care who won. I did care who lost. Pulling for the Dodgers is like pulling for the Yankees; at least the Dodgers weren't playing the Yankees. Then I would have to watch fishing shows or something. I thought it was nice

for Houston, given what they have been through.

What I will remember most of this World Series is the Dodger pitcher who pitched two terrible games. In Game 3, he gave up four runs and only got five outs. The Dodgers handed him the ball for Game 7. It happened again. In a few innings, he had given up all the runs Houston would need.

Even with such a disappointing performance, Yu Darvish stood taller than anyone on the field in this World Series. You know the story. Yuli Gurriel hit a home run off of Darvish in Game 3. Darvish is of Iranian and Japanese descent. When Gurriel returned to the dugout, he made a racially insensitive gesture. It was caught on camera. It was a painful moment, an embarrassing moment. We have lived those moments before, when the ugly side of us becomes public. We know what to expect. It will be met with a mixture of outrage and fatigue. Some will condemn, and the anger escalates. There may even be violence — in this case expressed in a 95-mile-an-hour fastball to the ribs.

But not this time. Yu Darvish responded with honor and hope. He tweeted: "No one is perfect, that includes you and I. What he did today was offensive, but I think we should put our energy into learning from it and not accusing. If we can take something positive from this, that is a big step. I am counting on everyone's big love."

But did he mean it? He could still throw a 95-mile-an-hour fastball.

It's Game 7; Darvish was again on the mound. As Gurriel walked to the plate in Dodger Stadium, the crowd erupted with boos. Standing there, Gurriel looked to the mound and tipped his hat. He offered the man he had dissed a sign of respect.

My friend Scott Black Johnston said, "There have been times when baseball has reflected the worst in our society. Not this time. Baseball gave the rest of us something to shoot for. Rather than condemn the offender, baseball worked to redeem him. Rather than leverage people's acrimony, baseball tipped its hat to mercy and honor."¹ They let the game be shaped by hope.

When we live our lives shaped by hope, it can provide the way out of no way; the meaning in that which is otherwise meaningless; the joy in the midst of sadness. You can base your life on hope because there was a baby born in Bethlehem because God couldn't stand being anywhere else but here. He is love, and as long as there is love, there is hope.

Let me tell you just one moment when I saw hope make a difference this week ... just one. About 50 of us went to the World War I Memorial. It was one of our "places hope takes you" experiences. You can't go to that memorial without feeling gratitude for the veterans who have died serving this nation. And how many have died serving other nations that they love like we love our nation. We honor the sacrifice, while we also pray for the day when the only thing left for soldiers to do is come home.

We gathered in the shadow of that tower and overlooking the city. We prayed for our city; the mayor and the superintendent of schools; the police chief; and the folks of Front Porch Alliance and Rose Brooks, of Community LINC and Operation Break-through and on and on.

We remembered the shooting in Sutherland Springs, so we prayed for so many cities in our nation that have experienced such violence. The list seems endless. And then we prayed for the people who have been shot and killed in Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas. We said their names out loud, speaking them into the hearing of God. There were 153 names — so far.

One name I prayed for was Lester. I prayed for his family, just weeks into their tragic loss. One moment he was here and the next he was gone. I know Lester's stepdad. He doesn't go to this church, but I told him, "Mike, we prayed for Lester and for your family. I know it doesn't heal it, but we remembered him and whispered his name into the hearing of God."

"But I don't go to your church," he said.

"That doesn't matter. We just wanted to remember him and you."

"You know, sometimes it feels like no one knows he was here and no one knows he's gone. I'm going to tell my wife your people did this for us. She won't believe it."

Now his heart is still broken, but I think it matters to know you are not alone. There is hope.

You can base your life on hope because there was a baby born in Bethlehem because God couldn't stand being anywhere else but here. He is love, and as long as there is love, there is hope.

¹Dr. Scott Black Johnston, sermon, "Indelible Ink," preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, Nov. 5, 2017

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.