

Hopes and Fears
7:30 & 10:00 a.m., Christmas Eve, Sunday, December 24, 2023
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy bleak streets shineth
The everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

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Hopes and fears.

Hopes and fears.

We are well acquainted with both ... perhaps these days the latter more than the former.

As we gather this night, it is Christmas morning in Bethlehem. The sun is rising over the Church of the Nativity. And while worship is still happening, the celebrations are muted.

Bethlehem and the bordering refugee camp of Dheisheh are in the occupied West Bank of Palestine. If Mary and Joseph were journeying there from Northern Israel today, they would have to go through scanners and answer questions from IDF border guards.

It's been nearly ten years since I visited there.

Nearly ten years since I sat with young men wearing keys around their necks, symbols of the homes their ancestors once had and heard them tell of the dehumanization, terrible violence and deep grief that were a part of their daily life.

Nearly ten years since I sat with a man who as the foreign press officer for the Israeli Defense Force was most often the first person on the scene whenever there was a suicide bombing and heard him tell graphic and terrible stories of Israeli children killed and wounded.

Hopes and fears.

Living in two radically different worlds mere miles apart they shared a common language of pain, rage and fear. The sky over Bethlehem was and remains not one of silent stars but the sky increasingly devoid of stars of which Dr. King spoke when violence begets more violence.

Hopes and fears.

The fears we know. And yet this night we claim a song of hope when we need it the most. And this hope – has a backstory.

When I had my first Christmas Eve service here at All Saints Church seven years ago, I was touched by and curious about the tradition of having a Qu’ran portion read by a Muslim sibling and a portion of the Hebrew scriptures read by a Jewish sibling.

I asked about it, and that is when I first heard names that are as legendary in this city as that of our own rector emeritus, George Regas -- the names Leonard Beerman, founding rabbi of Leo Baeck Temple and Hassan Hathout, Muslim physician and theologian.

As the months passed, I met others who, like me, had been drawn into what Hassan’s daughter Eba, calls this “triangle of love” of the three Abrahamic faiths joined by the sacred friendship shared by Regas, Beerman and Hathouyt.

Amazing friends like Ken and Allison Chasen, Salam and Leila Al-Maryati, Najeeba Syeed, Heather Miller, Ani Zonnenveld, Aryeh Cohen, Sharon Brous, Tarek Shawkey, Eba Hathout, Jonathan Klein, Joshua Grater, Joan Beerman and more.

And the triangle keeps expanding with new friends like Andrea Hodos and Aziza Hasan, Blair Imani, Estee Chandler, Hedab Tarifi and so many more.

The readings we have just heard have become one of my favorite parts of our Christmas Eve service. Songs of hope and love amidst so much fear.

A reminder that for us the sacred name of Jesus is also Isa Ibn Maryam, mentioned by name 25 times in the holy Qu’ran.

That the words of the holy prophet Isaiah, which are not about Jesus – Isaiah’s words have deep and sacred meaning of their own – are even more powerfully a shared prophetic word of hope .. that there is not a night so bleak that the divine cannot and will not break through.

The tradition of these readings on this night dates back to a visit Dr. Hathout paid to my predecessor, our dear friend, Ed Bacon, one day. Dr. Hathout told Ed about the importance of Mary in the Qu’ran and that while he was praying one morning, Mary had visited him. Ed said something clicked for him at that moment and he wanted the inter-religious essence of Christianity to become tangible in the liturgy.

It has become one of the most holy parts of this night for me ... as friends like Salam and Heather (Ani and Estee) and so many others have graced us with your presence and your love.

That we can stand together in this time and place is the living hope of this holy night, and to that all I can say is...

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

And yet, as holy as this always is, this is the first Christmas Eve it has truly felt like the deep radical act of transformative hope it has always been.

For this Christmas Eve, we are as aware as ever not only of the violence begetting violence that threatens to steal the stars from the sky, but of our own stories of pain, rage and fear. The hopes and fears not only of all the years but of this present moment that each of us brings into this place or wherever you are worshiping from online.

I mean, it's not just the world that is a hot mess ... we all are, aren't we? We are all a hot mess of hope and fear. And the fear can seem so much more powerful than the hope.

And yet we do not gather here to speak of the fear, other than to acknowledge its presence if for no other reason than to give it a little less power over us. We gather here to speak of hope ... in fact not only to speak of hope but to embody it.

The precious interfaith relationships we have here at All Saints Church have never been tested more profoundly than they have for the past three months.

Our increasingly traumatized and polarized world is itself increasingly urging if not demanding that we not only take a side but that we ostracize and demonize the other.

If we call for a ceasefire we are called antisemitic – no small thing in a world where antisemitism is real and deadly. If we do not, we ignore the cries of our Muslim and Palestinian Christian siblings who are dying even as I speak.

If we acknowledge the pain of Jew and Palestinian alike, we are told we are creating an unjust false equivalency, as if our own experience of our own pain of deep loss is lessened by the fact that someone else might have lost more.

Pick a side and demonize the other, we are told.

It is a dance that is far too familiar, playing out not only half a world away where the sun rises on Christmas but throughout our nation and even within our own communities of families and friends.

Pick a side and demonize the other. More and more, it's just what people do.

And after years of pandemic loss and fear of the other being sold to us by those who would profit most from it, sometimes we feel too exhausted to fight it. Sometimes it is easier to take a side, to shield our ears from the cries and our eyes from the humanity of the other that would complicate our stance with their reality. To blur the line between our own self-righteousness and the all-encompassing, all-loving righteousness of God
Or maybe just chuck it all together.

And yet on this night, and in the faith we share across its three incarnations and more, we are reminded of Dr. Hathout's words that "religion is a verb." Religion is an active force that can be used for good or evil. To wound or to heal. And we have a choice of how we will "religion."

This night, we are reminded of our dear sister Becca Stevens' words that there is only one sacrament of Christ with seven prisms and that is healing. And we have a choice of whether we will ask disparagingly "what is wrong with you?" or compassionately "what happened to you?"

This night, we are reminded that the God with whom Abraham argued for the sparing of Sodom if God could see the righteous humanity of just 10 residents of the entire city, *that* God bent down and kissed the earth in that land that all three of our faiths call holy because God refused to demonize anyone, refused to condemn anyone, refused to let our own warring madness be the last word.

In front of this church, the manger scene where the infant Christ is dressed amidst the rubble in a keffiyeh with stars of David pinned to it is a reminder that this night and every night God is present in the rubble. Yes, the rubble of Gaza and also the rubble of our own lives, in the depths of our despair and in the seeming hopelessness of the most intractable conflict, be it halfway around the world or within our own families.

It is a reminder that "God dwells in you" does not come with terms and conditions. Even in our moments of greatest fear and pain, we don't get to treat some human beings as sacred and others as not.

Too often, not only in Gaza but in our own lives, we face what our dear friend Rabbi Ken Chasen has called not the seeming simplicity of good vs. evil but the deep messiness of a life that pits good vs. good and evil vs. evil and yet demands we neither stay silent nor demonize the other.

And the answer, the hope in the midst of those ethical enigmas is not to shout louder so the complexity gets ignored and the inconvenient pain of the other gets drowned out, but to embrace one another even as we struggle mightily with one another.

To gather at the manger realizing it is not about whether we call ourselves Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, or whether we call ourselves anything at all ... but about refusing to let each other go and refusing to see anything less than the divine in the vulnerable child in that manger and in each other's eyes.

The Magnificat that Maryam sang in joyful anticipation of Isa's birth was not about declaring one group of people more righteous, worthy and loved than another but of toppling the structures that profit off the lies that some are more worthy and lovable than others, that some are more deserving of safety and dignity than others and that land is a commodity that can be owned rather than a partner to be shared for the thriving of the whole creation.

That is the good news of the incarnation. And whether we subscribe to any faith or no faith, we can be a part of its transformation.

Are you troubled this night?

Does "Joy to the World" stick in your throat even a little bit?

That's OK. Not only is it a big club – we've got jackets — but as Rabbi Beerman said:

"Our world *needs* troubled people ... (People) who care. Who are not ashamed to be sensitive and tender ... Who can resist all those, friends and enemies, who seek to prevent us from seeing the utter uniqueness and irreplaceability of our own and others' souls....

"We need those who have the courage to be ashamed, who have the muscle to care. And more than caring, we need those who will preserve and cultivate an enduring vision of the good, who will maintain a vision of the future as a permanent possibility in the present."

That vision is what we proclaim and embody this night. For we are here together – Jew, Muslim, Christian and more – to witness and proclaim that...

Jesus is born this night in the rubble.

The rubble of Gaza.

The rubble left by Hamas.

The rubble left by our own nation around the world.

The rubble of the broken relationships, the missed opportunities, injustices and lost loves of our own lives.

And we ask like Bastille of Pompeii, "Where do we begin, the rubble or our sins?" and we discover they are one and the same.

And yet the night is not yet devoid of stars ... because we are here as a testament to love that rebuilds from the rubble.

Violence is begetting violence, and yet the night is not yet devoid of stars because in the bleak streets shineth the everlasting light.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in the Christ who is born in Bethlehem, Deheisheh, and in Gaza.

In the Christ who is born on Skid Row and on the border where the coyotes and ICE agents prey on Jesus' fellow refugees.

In the Christ who is born around your dining room table, and as the clock changes from 3:10 to 3:11 am as you lie sleepless, afraid and wondering if tomorrow will bring more of the same.

For you are not alone.

We are not alone.

Nobody, no matter how bleak their circumstance needs to be alone.

We have each other and this night we sing the song of Emmanuel and remember that God is with us, too.

I will not tell you to be not afraid. There are real fears creeping around our doors and even closer still.

I will not tell you to be not afraid. But this night and every night, I will say the hope is greater than the fear. And the sure and certain hope is this: We are not alone. You are not alone. We have God and we have each other. And our holy task and deepest joy is to go to where those most vulnerable among us lie and with our very bodies and lives testify to that truth.

And the love that binds us all together with one another and with God is the child in the manger, is the word of the Prophet Mohammed, praise be unto him, is the great light that still shines on those to whom Isaiah speaks who still live in exile and fear.

The hope of the world is in this room this night ... right here, right now. Because tonight we gather at the manger – Jew, Muslim and Christian – believer and struggler – friend and foe – and we say with one voice that the love that is God that binds us together is stronger than the most powerful force that would tear us apart.

Bethlehem and Deheisheh are far from still ... they are troubled and so are our hearts and spirits. And yet Christ is born this night in the rubble. Because there is no corner of the world or our hearts so troubled that love cannot reach and touch and heal.

And so, in the words of Dr. Hassan Hathout, I bid us sing a Christmas Carol that is as old as the angels who sang it over Bethlehem that night:

“Friends in faith rise, while you still have a choice.

“On the wings of love, soar above.

“And sing with your hearts, not only your voice.

“God is love.

“God is love.

“God is love.”

Merry Christmas. Peace on earth.
Shanti. Salaam. Shalom. Amen.