

# MEETING HOPES AND FEARS

## Sermon, Christmas Day 2016

### Texts: John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-4

After Christmas Eve services last night (*actually, earlier this morning, as I got home well after midnight*), I posted a Face Book message to an old high school friend who now lives in Paris. When I had reconnected with Carla (*she was the then-girlfriend of a very close friend when I was in eleventh grade*) via Face Book a year or so ago, she told me I was really the only religious friend she knew. I posted “Joyeux Noel,” which is the French equivalent of our Merry Christmas; she posted back “Joyeuses fêtes,” which is the rough equivalent of our “Happy Holidays” ... which for some reason caused me to think of “Happy Feet,” that silly penguin movie, but I digress. Although I never wish anyone “Happy Holidays” myself, I really don’t mind receiving such well-intentioned wishes; I’m not a pietistic curmudgeon who despises non-religious festive greetings or non-religious songs during this holy time of the year. Sometimes it does get a bit much, though; riding back home in the car in the wee hours this Christmas morning, and riding into church an hour ago, I was bugged that I could find nothing BUT the non-religious “happy holiday” type of songs on the radio, and I would have just loved to have heard something like the two I heard on the way home LAST Christmas Eve: Celtic Woman’s “O Holy Night” (*see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZ-8jYpa1-o>*) and a superb rendition by the Trans-Siberian Orchestra of “Christmas Canon” (*see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVUPURixlSk>*) (*to be honest, part of what bugged me this morning is I also missed the Beatles’ Brunch, which usually runs on B101 during my ride to church each Sunday!*),

Again, don’t get me wrong, I do think many of the nonreligious Christmas songs are fun; I have favorites and I’m sure you do, too. “*Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer*” ... what is there not to like about that song? It’s fun, it’s good, it brings back childhood memories. And “*Let it Snow*,” which apparently isn’t going to happen this Christmas. Or “*It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*,” usually a song your mother or spouse might sing trying to cheer you up when you have a bad attitude. Or that wonderful classic, a real beauty of a song (not) ... “*Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer*” ... which begins, “*Grandma got run over by a reindeer ... Walkin’ home from our house, Christmas Eve ... You can say there’s no such thing as Santa ... But as for me and Grandpa, we believe!*” Does anyone remember the one that begins: “*The sun is shining, the grass is green, the orange and the palm trees sway. There’s never been such a day in Beverly Hills, LA. But its December 24, and I’m longing to be up north...*” Who knows the next line? “*I’m dreaming of a White Christmas, just like the ones I used to know; where the treetops glisten, and children listen, to hear sleigh bells in the snow.*” Another Christmas standard, by Mel Torme, called “*The Christmas Song*.” He wrote the lyrics in July in the midst of a heat wave in the San Fernando Valley just northeast of Los Angeles. It was so hot outside, and all he wanted to think about were “*... chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose, tiny tots with their eyes all aglow, and folks dressed up like Eskimos.*”

I really don’t mind these songs; they’re fun, they push my nostalgic buttons; but I don’t want a steady diet of them ... ALL. THE. TIME. They do fall way short in what they leave out about the Reason for the season, the Incarnation and all that entails, and another thing about them is simply this: They just don’t do well with loss and failure, or with disappointment, or loneliness, or sadness. It’s especially hard this season if you’re feeling sad, if you just dropped someone off at the hospital, if you’re missing a loved one, if you’ve just come away from a difficult experience with a friend or family member, to enter wholeheartedly into something like, oh, “*Holly Jolly Christmas*.” It just doesn’t fit, it just doesn’t cut it, and everyone knows it doesn’t.

That’s one thing that’s so helpful about the Christmas carols, because they are a wonderful and rich mix ... combining the minor keys of lament and longing with the major keys of triumph, joy and celebration ... and they combine in order to drive home the essential truth of Christmas itself: WHY JESUS CAME. When the Bible speaks of just why it is that Jesus has come it employs a whole series of words and concepts that carry huge emotional and weighty significance ... words like “propitiation,” taken from the language of the temple sacrifice, or “justification,” taken from the law courts, or “redemption,” a word whose most common usage in that day was the people’s understanding of the slave market and what it meant to be purchased at a price. I love that line from “*O Little Town of Bethlehem*” we sang last night: “*The Hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.*” The message of the carols resonates with the hopes and fears of the human heart; the heart’s deepest longings. Four major plaintive cries of the human heart are also represented in our Advent wreath candles: longings that are more than amply addressed and answered in the Lord Jesus Christ. THE CRY FOR LOVE, THE CRY FOR HOPE, THE CRY FOR JOY, THE CRY FOR PEACE.

THE CRY FOR LOVE. Everyone wants to know love; everyone wants to love and to be loved. If you are of my generation or older, you may remember Peter and Gordon. Peter and Gordon’s most famous song was “*A World Without Love*” in February 1964 (*written, actually, by Paul McCartney when he was 16 years old. He was dating Peter Asher’s sister Jane, and gave the lyrics to Peter.*) Remember? “*Please, lock me away, and don’t allow the day here inside where I hide with my loneliness. I don’t care what they say, I won’t stay In a world without love.*” He doesn’t want to stay in a world without love, and neither do you nor I, because the human heart LONGS for love. We need to love and be loved ... and the Bible answers, especially at Christmas, “*Here is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning*

*sacrifice for our sins.*" In other words, the starting place for love is with God Who is the essence of love, and it really is impossible to conceive of genuine love without him.

**THE CRY FOR HOPE.** A world without hope is a bleak and frightening place. Without something to look forward to, our lives can become living deaths. Do you know why you exist? Do you know why you were created? Do you know what you want to do with your life? Does your heart cry out for meaning? Of course it does. And our hope, our purpose, as so succinctly explained in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever ... in this life and in the next. That gives our lives meaning and genuine hope and purpose. Christmas tells us God has come in the flesh that we might have life that is full, abundant, rich, eternal and purposeful.

**THE CRY FOR JOY.** I've said this several times over the past twenty years, and I'm sure to say it a few more times before I retire, but if I've learned nothing else in my years of ministry, I've learned we will never understand God until we get it through our heads that the God we worship is JOYFUL. He is the most joyous Being in the universe. God did not create the world in order to judge it, or dominate it, or to make it obey the dictates of His will. God made the world to DELIGHT in it, He made this world and all in it to share in His overflowing joy and love. Christmas tells us He loved this world so much that He sent his only begotten Son, not to condemn it, but to save it ... and to show us the joyful Way, the glorious Truth, and the wonderful Life. CS Lewis, in his autobiographical book of his Christian conversion entitled Surprised by Joy, says when he first really examined his own life, he didn't like what he found: *"I examined myself and I found what appalled me ... a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, and harem of fondled hatreds."* And he goes on in that book to basically describe how he discovered that in Jesus Christ he was set free. *"And if the Son will make you free, you will be free indeed."* Perhaps my favorite C.S. Lewis' quote: *"Joy is the serious business of heaven."* Lewis learned we begin to discover that joy through the One who brings us peace.

**THE CRY FOR PEACE, or Shalom.** *Shalom* is a wonderful Hebrew word that means completeness, wholeness, health, soundness, tranquility, fullness, harmony, as well as the absence of agitation or discord, all wrapped up in one word. We long for someone or something who can bring us peace, shalom, wholeness. And Christmas tells us the One Who is called the Prince of Peace is that One Who can pull it all together, and make all things well.

Our last carol, "*The First Noel*" is the oldest familiar carol in the English language. After having been handed down by word-of-voice for generations, it was finally written in a collection of Christmas carols published in 1833 ... but no one knows who wrote it, or who composed the tune. For that matter, no one knows for certain the origin of the word "Noel." Some historians believe the word is actually of English origin, not French (*sorry, Carla*), and that the correct English spelling of the word is "Nowell." They believe that Nowell is another example of the English proclivity for *abbreviation*. For example, in the 1400s. an English hospital called St. Mary of Bethlehem was a hospital for the insane. In those days when the mentally ill were often just warehoused and often abused, that institution became known for its noise, confusion and generally chaotic atmosphere. The original name of St. Mary's of Bethlehem was shortened to Bethlehem, and then contracted into Bed'lam. BEDLAM became synonymous with the unorganized confusion and shouts, screams, yells and assorted noises issuing from a medieval insane asylum.

Another example: the English took the phrase "*God be with you*", and corrupted and contracted the four words into "*Goodbye*." It seems that the phrase "**NOW ALL IS WELL!**" was used by our British forebears as a Christmas greeting, as if to say, "*The Prince of Peace has come, so, now all is well with the world!*" Just as "St. Mary of Bethlehem" became "Bedlam," "Now All is Well" soon became "Now's well" and then merely "Now'ell;" So, when the unknown author of "The First Now'ell" sat down to compose his narrative poem about the birth of Jesus, he must have decided the message of the angels, "*Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people*" was a message to proclaim "**Now all is well**" for Christ is born in Bethlehem. That was the First **Nowell**, which "was said by the angel to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay." "*Now all is well, now all is well, now all is well, now all is well...*" Why? Because "*...born is the king of Israel!*"

Was all well? Not really ... those poor shepherds "in fields as they lay" remained poor shepherds. They still lived in an occupied country; existing under the heavy boot of Roman imperialism. The unknown author lived in a time when life was usually nasty, brutish and short. Disease, death, poverty and suffering still abounded. However ... the author still wrote with conviction, "*Now all is well, now all is well, now all is well, now all is well, Born is the king of Israel.*"

"*The light shines in the darkness,*" John tells us, "*and the darkness will never overcome it.*" Because this same infant grew into manhood to become the Christ "*who with His blood mankind hath bought;*" the wonder of His birth is entwined with the wonder of His death and resurrection, which secures for all time the hope that ALL will indeed one day be well ... complete, redeemed and restored. The hopes and fears of all the years are indeed met in Jesus Christ.

One final note: there is sweet irony in the linguistic derivation of the word Bedlam. From St. Mary's of Bethlehem came the confusion, disorder and chaos of Bedlam ... but from the "original" Bethlehem in Judea comes the peace, beauty, order, wholeness of Jesus Christ as He is born into this world to establish His reign forever and ever. "*Now all is well, now all is well, now all is well, now all is well, born is the King of Israel.*"