

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:1-14

Luke 2:1-20

It is impossible for me to hear these passages of scripture and not think of the great oratorio by George Frederick Handel. Handel sets these words to glorious music that transcends time. But, I think there is much to glean from these words beyond that which makes this music so grand.

In the reading from Isaiah, we see the promise of light coming into a dark world. We see a hope that is greater than what the Israelites were experiencing at the time this passage was written. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians and the southern kingdom of Judah was threatened. Truly, these were dark days. The prophet writes to give the people hope that things will improve. Better days are ahead. As a sign of this promise, Isaiah tells of a child to be born who will establish a kingdom of endless peace.

Luke tells us the rest of the story. Although the Jews felt that the promise of Isaiah had been fulfilled by the birth and reign of Hezekiah, Luke provides us with the glorious truth of a new king born during the reign of Emperor Augustus. Again, it was a dark time for the people of Israel. Their every move was monitored by the imperial troops of Rome. But, how were the Israelites to understand that this child was the promised one, not Hezekiah or some other individual?

We see that the darkness has returned to Israel. They had a fleeting period of self-rule that was crushed by the Romans. Under the Romans, the tyrannical rule of Herod was established which was very dark. The story of the murder of the infant boys recorded in the gospel after the magi visited is an example of the ruthlessness of Herod's reign. But, out of this darkness, the angels bring great light. A new star appears in the sky. Shepherds are told of the birth of a child in Bethlehem and the magi are drawn from their homes in Assyria. These two groups become the first to spread the word that this child would be someone great. Herod's own paranoia surrounding the possible birth of a legitimate king underscores the importance of this birth.

Not only are the first messengers of the story lowly shepherds and foreigners, the great event of the story - the birth of a new king - happens in a barn in a small town, not in a palace in the capital city. The royal fanfare was heard by the shepherds in the fields, not by courtiers in grand estates. The birth was attended by livestock, not midwives and nurses. This is not the birth most Israelites were expecting.

We are frequently surprised when our lives take an unexpected turn. We may be like the magi, traveling long distances, looking for the birth of a king in the capital city, only to be led to a humble dwelling in a small town. We may be like the shepherds, looking forward to a peaceful night in the fields, keeping a sharp eye towards the edges of the fields, looking for wolves, only to be greeted by an angelic host with a fantastic message. In a world that was governed by fear, by oppression, the Israelites received a new message of peace "Fear not, the angel said. I bring

you glad tidings of great joy.” God has turned the world upside down. The king, the savior, is not born in a palace, but in a stable. The royal heralds are replaced by angels. The first messengers of the good news of the birth are shepherds, not courtiers.

Unto to us is born this day, a savior who is God’s Messiah. Let us join the shepherds and make haste to see the One born to us. Let us be like the magi and travel to the out-of-the-way place where the miraculous happens. Let us be like Mary, and treasure all of these things in our hearts. Let us go out into the world and proclaim the message that there is a new day dawning - a new world-changing life that has entered into us, bringing joy and peace to all.

Merry Christmas.