

“Scene, Savior, Setting”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Luke 2:1-20

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December 24, 2016
Christmas Eve – 5 pm

The scene is set. Jesus is in the manger, Mary and Joseph, adoringly standing near. We still find this scene on Christmas cards sent by those who dare portray Jesus’s birth, though many choose more universal, seasonal images of decorated Christmas trees with wrapped gifts, or homes with warm lights shining within and gentle snowfall without, or simply a dove with the word, “Peace.”

All such Christmas images seem to want to portray a serenity. At Christmas, we savor the scene of the nativity, longing for the elusive peace within it, if even for a day, or perhaps just this night. The nativity scene gives us serenity.

Within the scene, there is also a savior. He is not named in our reading this evening, but the angel Gabriel previously announced to Mary she would give birth to a son, and his name would be Jesus. Jesus means savior. So tonight is about the gift of a savior.

Almost from the moment of Jesus’ birth, it seems the idea of savior has been given so many layers by both church and culture that many are not sure what savior means. In modern times, the need for a savior seems almost superfluous.

In some ways the notion of a savior has been narrowed to good news for me, not good news for all people, unless you believe the way I do. So, we say, “I believe in Jesus.” “I am a Christian.” “I am saved.” So, in this scene of a savior, we have serenity and security, but it seems to be just a kind of ticket to heaven personal security, to which others must buy in if they want the salvation benefits. That seems to be a limited view of savior.

What is about to happen, what we are about to hear, will move our eyes’ focus from the serene scene of the manger, and expand our view past a personal savior. If we came this evening to wallow in the serenity of the scene, or to find personal comfort in the security of a savior, we may well miss the scandal in the setting.

Luke has already given us the setting. This is all taking place in Caesar Augustus’ world, and on his watch. Augustus was the one who brought the Roman peace, the Pax Romana. As a result of him making Rome great again, he was endowed with the names son of god and savior. Now into Augustus’ world, into his realm of power, God is sending Jesus, a counter-savior. So, we have the very contrast between the enthroned and the lowly about which Mary sang in her Magnificat, confirmed in that it will be shepherds who are first to be told the good news.

The setting calls us past serenity and security into the world, a world described well by Max Lucado in an essay entitled, “Do We Really Need Christmas This Year?” As I will also share in the later service, he writes of the power of God’s action in the manger scene, “The moment Mary touched Jesus’ face is the moment God’s case was made: there is no place God will not go. If God is willing to be born in a barnyard, then expect God to be at work anywhere – bars, bedrooms, boardrooms, and brothels. No place is too common. No person is too hardened. No distance is too far. There is no person God cannot reach. There is no limit to God’s love. When Christ was born, so was our hope.” [Lucado, Max, “Do We Really Need Christmas This Year?”, paraphrased from online at: <https://maxlucado.com/really-need-christmas-year/>]

For me, there is hope in the setting, and the sharing of that hope is entrusted to us. So, tonight, as we live within the serenity of the nativity scene; and dwell within the security of a personal savior, my hope is those senses of serenity and security will strengthen us to live in the tension of the setting, so in the coming days, we will dare tell good news as did those lowly shepherds.