

Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2015 (5:00 pm)  
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

## The Baby Brings Hope

*Alleluia! Unto us a child is born. Oh, come let us adore Him.*

Everyone in the story of Christ's birth has hope on this night. Mary and Joseph hope to find a safe place for their baby's birth. They hope their baby will be healthy. Health and safety for the new baby and Mary are their greatest desire.

The shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem hope for what they desire every night – a calm, peaceful night. No wild animals or thieves attacking the flock; no lost sheep to search for; no storms, decent weather, not too cold or rainy; and a few hours of sleep when not on watch.

The wise men have traveled far. They hope to find whatever, whoever, the star reveals. They hope their calculations are accurate. They hope the prophecies will be fulfilled. They hope to see the new king, the Messiah, the Christ.

Herod hopes that these strange visitors, wise men, magi, kings, might lead him to the one they seek. King Herod needs to know if there is a real threat to his rule, his power, his control. He hopes to know more about the strange Jewish prophecies.

The baby's birth changes everything. Jesus lying in a manger transforms all hopes. Angels visit the shepherds. The shepherds visit the baby. This is more than they ever hoped to experience. Now they know God is real. God is here. God can change the world. The shepherds know that hope comes in experiencing the reality of God.

The wise men are also changed. A baby born to poor parents in a stall on the outskirts of King David's home town is not what they expected. They are so transformed by seeing this baby that they know they cannot report back to Herod. They can't go home the same way they came.

Herod's anxious hopes are transformed by his fear. We see in Herod how evil can take hold of hope and turn it to hate – all because of fear. In his rage at being tricked by the wise men, Herod orders the death of all little boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding area who are two-years old and younger.

Once they knew their baby was safe and healthy; once Mary recovered from giving birth; after the shepherds and wise men visited Mary and Joseph, hope changes. They begin to think it all could be true. Their son may indeed grow up to be the savior of the world.

They come to see this hope realized as Jesus grows, as a young boy, as a teenager. As a young adult. Mary saw the fulfillment of this hope with her son's passion and glory. She was at the cross. She saw him risen from the dead; she saw the power of the Spirit at work in the disciples after Pentecost; she witnessed the growth of the church.

What about us? What do we hope for this Christmas Eve 2015? A special gift? Time with family and friends? A vacation or special trip? What do we hope for in celebrating the birth of this baby? How does God come to us?

One of my favorite hymns we sing tonight is “O little town of Bethlehem.” It was written by Philip Brooks, who was originally from Boston and came here to Alexandria in 1856 to attend the Virginia Theological Seminary. Brooks experienced the growing tensions between the north and south. After graduating from VTS, he served in Philadelphia and spoke out against slavery. After the Civil War ended in 1865, Brooks went to the Holy Land and visited Bethlehem. He came home to Philadelphia and wrote the verses for this hymn for his Sunday School classes. Brooks knew that in Christ’s birth “*the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*”

We bring our hopes and fears to the baby Jesus. The baby brings us hope. Hope is a verb and a noun. Hope is something we do and something we can have. Light brings hope. Children bring hope. Generosity brings hope. Joy brings hope. Worship is an expression of our hope. Hope frees us from all that oppresses. Hope means we have a future.

Take hope home tonight. Let the baby’s gift to you be hope. Share this gift with others, especially those who are challenged tonight by darkness, by illness, by evil, by loneliness, by death. The baby brings hope for every person in every time in every place.

Thus St. Paul could write, “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope ...*” Romans 15:13

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Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20