

Christmas Eve Meditation  
Forks of the Brandywine Presbyterian Church  
Isaiah 9; Luke 2  
“Coming Home”

In his book *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 1885, Theodore Roosevelt (26th pres 1901-1909) penned these words: “Black care rarely sits behind a rider whose pace is fast enough...” Teddy Roosevelt knew a great deal of black care. A year earlier on February 14, 1884 his mother passed away in the early morning hours of typhoid fever at the age of 48. His wife Alice passed away in the afternoon of the same day at the age of 22, shortly after giving birth to their daughter. Roosevelt’s diary entry for that day was a large X through the page, and at the bottom, “The light has gone out of my life.” And so he left his budding career in politics and spent the next few years of his life traveling back and forth to his ranch in the Badlands of North Dakota.

We live in a world where black care intends to take its seat behind all of us. We are reminded even in today’s news of service personnel deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, these wars that have gone on now for over 8 years. We read unsettling reports of American citizens arrested in countries like Pakistan, apparently because they were going to be trained in terrorism with a view to returning here to put their training into practice. We are reminded that unemployment in the US is still in double digits and that, though the economy may be picking up, this upturn is not yet translating into new jobs. For those Christians who find it hard to envision living in an America where Christianity is no longer the dominant consensus, where Harvard chaplains are praised for offering us a vision of goodness without God, it is not hard to develop a gloomy outlook regarding the future. These are just a few of the black cares that ride close behind us at our particular point in history. And then of course, there are the personal worries and discouragements and setbacks and losses that come in and, as Teddy Roosevelt said, take the light out of our lives. Roosevelt found that at a full gallop on horseback across the Badlands he could outrun black care for a little while. Others turn to less exotic means to put it behind or away from them--sometimes through amusement and escape, sometimes by pouring themselves relentlessly into their work, sometimes through drugs and alcohol--there is really no end to the things we are willing to try. But it is impossible to outrun black care indefinitely.

750 years before Christ, Isaiah the prophet saw in the birth of a new member of royal line of David a sign of God’s deliverance from war and oppression, indeed deliverance from the brokenness of life in a world marred by human sin and rebellion. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who live in the shadow of death, light has dawned.” The placement of these words in Isaiah 9, shortly after the sign of the birth of Emmanuel, suggests that the Syrian and Ephraimite siege of Jerusalem has collapsed. A new day is at hand for God’s people. They may still be in darkness, struggling with the devastation and deprivations of a long siege. But, they are not urged to try to outrun the darkness. Instead, they are called to look to the light. A child has been born for us. A son has been given to us.

The names of the new king invite people to again see in him a powerful sign of God's presence. He shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Lofty names for a royal baby, though not unheard of in the ancient Near East. Kings, after all were viewed as earthly representatives of the nation's god. The royal ancestor, David himself, was called a man after God's own heart. That qualifies him as king. In Psalm 2, David says, I will declare the decree of the Lord. He said to me, You are my son; today I have become your father. Yet the honorific titles of the Davidic king leave the door open for a fuller, deeper significance--a significance that would be realized in the words of John 1, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, of St Paul, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's sins against them. In a world we wish to keep black care many strides behind us, God says, stop racing. Stop riding so fast. Look at the light. Look to my king. Ride behind him and black care cannot overwhelm you. He will bring peace.

St Luke tells us that the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in the days of Caesar Augustus. Augustus was the son of Julius Caesar who first introduced Emperor Worship. Upon his death, Julius Caesar was declared to be a god. Augustus, his son, ran with this idea. He bore the title "princeps" (the Latin origin of our English word prince). In Rome, the "princeps" was regarded as a son of a god who would also become divine upon his death. In this sense, the emperors were a higher order of men, elevated above the senators of Rome. This man Augustus, who allowed his subjects to honor him as they would the gods, ruled the land of Israel. In his days, days that to God's people seemed to be nothing less than a prolonged exile, an enduring siege, angels appeared to shepherds and announced the birth of a savior, who is Messiah, the Lord. In the darkness of that night, they were invited to look to the light. To rejoice that there was another king, another prince.

They were given a sign--a baby in a manger. This, of course, would enable them to find the child. Yet there is in this sign an echo of the prophet Isaiah. The word manger is rarely used in scripture, here in the nativity narrative and one other time in the gospels. It is only used about a half a dozen times in the Greek Old Testament. The most striking of these is in Isaiah Ch 1 where the prophet announces God's grievance with his people. It is cast in the language of home and family, as is so often the case in the prophets. One may think, for example, of Hosea. When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called him, the more they went away from me..." Manger appears in Isaiah Ch 1. Sons I raised up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, the donkey knows its master's manger, but my people do not know, they do not understand." The first readers of Luke's gospel, hearing the sign to the shepherds, would have thought of those first words of Isaiah. God's people were like rebellious children who didn't know where their real home was. Even cows, even donkeys know where their home is. But here also is this child, here is the messiah, you'll find him in a manger. It is a hint to those who love the prophets and the ancient visions of God's salvation that this child knows where his home is and will obey all the father's will.

During this season I've encouraged you to think about home--to think about what defines home for you. I suspect for most of us, home suggests a place where "black care" is left on the outside, where memory is pleasant and people are caring and the place is safe. So where is this place? Where do you find it? By God's grace, sometimes our homes are like that, or at least enough like that to give us a true taste of the notion of home. But our homes are fragile places. Our true home is in the Gospel story. Our true home is in the kingdom of God. Our true home is where the light of the savior shines now in the darkness and drives black care back into the shadows where it belongs, and from whence it will flee away when the zeal of the Lord of hosts has finished all his redeeming work for those upon whom his favor rests.