

Faith Mennonite Church  
Christmas Eve 2009  
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### Where fear and hope meet

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;  
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.<sup>1</sup>*

Tonight, in this manger, hope and fear meet. We can only imagine all the fear that was part of Mary & Joseph's journey to Bethlehem: fear that Mary's time would come while they were still on the road; fear about how the Bethlehem relatives would receive them, given that rumors about Mary's pregnancy had been rampant in Nazareth and news had a way of traveling even by foot; fear of what this new census and tax of Caesar Augustus would mean for their future—they could hardly make ends meet as it was without a new tax to pay.

Yet, for every fear, there was a countervailing hope: Mary & Joseph hoped that God's promise of blessing to Abraham and Sarah and their descendents was somehow being fulfilled through Mary's pregnancy; they hoped God would continue to work through the small and insignificant ones in the world—like the people of Israel, like them—bringing justice and bringing peace; they hoped that the child born to them was the longed-for Messiah who would free them from the bondage of Roman occupation.

Tonight, in this manger, hope and fear continue to meet. We fear for those who are traveling in the midst of a winter blizzard. We fear for those who have been evicted from foreclosed homes and for those looking for employment in this difficult economy. We fear for the lives of innocents caught in the midst of warfare around the world, much of it supported by our country. We fear that peace will never come as long as nations and leaders favor military solutions over diplomatic approaches and social and human development initiatives. We fear that global climate change may not be curbed in time to prevent increased suffering among the world's poorest because of natural disaster and drought. We fear that too many decisions in our society are based on irrational fear.

Yet, like Mary and Joseph, we also hope. We hope in the fact that the Spirit of Christ, which began in this humble manger, has inspired people and changed lives for 2000 years. We hope as we see Christian churches band together to offer services and support to people in poverty. We hope in the peaceful witness of Christian Peacemaker Teams and Muslim Peacemaker Teams, and in the mustard seed promise of microfinance programs that help some of the world's poorest people out of poverty. We hope in stories of reconciliation between individuals and between religious communities previously divided by century- and millennium-old divisions. We hope in the resurrection, in the promise of life and light in the darkness.

In his book *The Hungering Dark*, author and minister Frederick Buechner wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," 1868, *The Church Porch*, 1874

[A] child [is] born in the night among beasts. The sweet breath and steaming dung of beasts. And nothing is ever the same again.

Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen him in a stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of [humankind]. If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too. And this means that we are never safe, that there is no place where we can hide from God, no place where we are safe from his power to break in two and recreate the human heart because it is just where he seems most helpless that he is most strong, and just where we least expect God that [s]he comes most fully.<sup>2</sup>

Our fears and hopes meet in this “ludicrous depth of self-humiliation”—the birth of a baby whom we recognize as Creator and Lord of the universe. This God-with-us, Emmanuel, steps into the circumstances we fear and that very Presence becomes our source of hope. The manger becomes our own place of rebirth. From the manger we can grow in our commitment to be with God, to trust in the hope and light of God, a light that the deepest darkness, our deepest fears, cannot swallow.

*O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray,  
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell.  
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*. Harper SanFrancisco, 1985. 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, op cit.