

St James United Church

Message for December 24, 2025 Christmas Eve (Candlelight Communion Service)

“Called to Shine” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft



To begin I'd like to thank Frances McNiven for writing the poem with which we began worship. I didn't give her direction apart from it being about Jesus' birth. I feel she captured the mood of that night. I say night though Luke doesn't tell it that way, only that angels came to shepherds at night, but our instinct for it all to have happened at night captures what the moment would have been, hints at the fear, uncertainty and pain in the narrative that cards and crèches tend to edit out.

Consider what the tale actually tells us. Mary and Joseph are in a precarious situation. Mary is not yet married to Joseph but pregnant with a child that isn't his. They live in an occupied land, their home part of an extensive empire. They were kept in that empire through military force, the army using terror to keep people in line, including gendered violence. The census that Luke writes about is all about taxes, needed to fund the occupation and keep money flowing to investors in Rome. Now there were local people who benefited from this situation. The rich got richer at the expense of the poor, buying up properties because the cost of living was so high that people were crushed by debt. The detail of the census taking place in people's ancestral homes points to how people were forced to move around, effectively refugees in their own land, and in Matthew's version they flee to a safer country. And though cards and crèches whitewash everyone's faces, Mary and Joseph were Galilean Jews, everyone in the story brown-skinned people from what Romans would rename Palestine after the Second Jewish-Roman war.

It sounds like it could be happening right now, doesn't it? And Frances' poem captures this too, captures how many of us are feeling, a pall of worry hanging over us for different reasons. For some it's the cost of living crisis, others the rise in violence, especially gendered violence, for others it's worry about climate and other catalysts of unrest that force people to flee their homes, for others the wars – like in Gaza in what increasingly looks like a genocide, and Ukraine as that war drags on, the regime change in Syria and uncertainty where it will land, the violence in Haiti, many other concerns, each echoed in the narrative Luke creates around Jesus' birth.

But this is where the story is so special, because despite how shadowed it is with unrest, hurt and fear, it's a story we rightly paint with light. It's filled with strength and resilience, moments of love and compassion, hope for a peace built on justice. Consider Mary who says yes to a pregnancy that could have got her killed; Joseph who stands by her despite the risk it brought to him, the family who takes in this couple, not in the guestroom (a better translation of that part of the story) but nevertheless in a shelter in another part of the house where animals come in out of the cold. Consider too the shepherds, likely hired in that role because their families' land had been bought out, but they are the ones to whom God shares the message of Jesus' birth. Consider how the angels refer to Jesus as Saviour, Lord, Bearer of Peace, all terms with which people lauded the emperor, reminding us that the way Jesus will teach and live is God's way, one that brings lasting peace.

That peace comes to us as we apply that strength, resilience, compassion, caring, welcome and solidarity into the situations in which we find ourselves. A shadow is present but it's cast because there's also light, not just darkness. We are each that light, the light that is Jesus born not for himself but to strengthen the light that is in all of us. We each can tend that light and as it grows brighter, join it to others. It may feel like we're in a long night but remember that the night is a time for dreaming, that dark winters are a time to plan, the night sky is needed to see the brightness of stars. As Frances suggested, we are those stars, called to shine with love, with strength, for peace, Jesus' light shining within us.