

**Where is Hope?; Luke 2:1-20; Christmas Eve B**  
**Second Presbyterian Church**  
**M. Evelyn Graham**  
**December 24, 2023**

Tonight we read what is probably the most familiar story in the entire Bible. Try to listen for something new, as I read from Luke 2, verses 1-20.

**Scripture:**

<sup>2</sup>In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
 and on earth peace among those whom God favors!’

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

**Sermon:**

María and José Gonzalez live in Barrio San Blas, one of the most dangerous and poorest neighborhoods in Caracas, Venezuela.<sup>1</sup> They have not been married long and have just recently discovered that María is pregnant. José works as a bus driver in the city and earns the minimum wage of 130 bolivars a month, which translates to about 6 US dollars a month.<sup>2</sup> Maria lost her job several years ago and is selling baked goods on her front door stoop to those who have American dollars to pay for such treats. Many days she sells nothing.

The economy in Venezuela is dismal. “Poor economic management...” has left the country struggling...” with rampant inflation, goods shortages [of basic necessities], unemployment and crime.”<sup>3</sup> Just to give you an idea, Venezuela’s inflation rate in 2021 was 686%<sup>4</sup>, while inflation in 2021 in the US was 4.7% then up to 8% in 2022<sup>5</sup>, when inflation was considered very bad here. The country’s president, Nicolás Maduro, has recently lifted some restrictions on outside currency, and some people are now paid with US dollars. This change in government regulation has helped the economy in Venezuela but has also created a huge pay gap between the “haves” and the “have nots.” It is estimated that the wealthiest Venezuelans [are] 70 times richer than the poorest.<sup>6</sup>

The changes in the economy have not helped María and José, and they are distressed about the safety and quality of life their child will face growing up in Caracas. After much discussion they decide to take what little savings they have and leave their home and families. María and José pack all they have into one suitcase and join the seven million other Venezuelans who have left their country<sup>7</sup> to find a better life. They have some distant relatives in Minneapolis who say there are many jobs cooking and cleaning for people there. So, José and María opt to travel with a group headed to the United States.

<sup>1</sup> “Venezuela Country Profile”, 12/4/23, BBC News online, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19649648> accessed 12/21/23.

<sup>2</sup> “Venezuela’s Slow Economic Recovery Leaves poorest behind,” 2/3/23, BBC online, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-64466400> accessed 12/21/23.

<sup>3</sup> “Venezuela Country Profile”, 12/4/23, BBC News online, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19649648> accessed 12/21/23.

<sup>4</sup> “Venezuela’s Slow Economic Recovery Leaves poorest behind,” 2/3/23, BBC online, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-64466400> accessed 12/21/23.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/USA/united-states/inflation-rate-cpi#:~:text=The%20Laspeyres%20formula%20is%20generally,a%203.46%25%20increase%20from%202020> accessed 12/22/23.

<sup>6</sup> Isayen Herrera and Frances Robles, “Ferraris and Hungry Children: Venezuela’s Socialist Vision in Shambles,” 3/21/23, New York Times online, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/21/world/americas/venezuela-economy-wealth-gap.html?searchResultPosition=2> accessed 12/21/23.

<sup>7</sup> Isayen Herrera and Frances Robles, “Ferraris and Hungry Children: Venezuela’s Socialist Vision in Shambles,” 3/21/23, New York Times online, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/21/world/americas/venezuela-economy-wealth-gap.html?searchResultPosition=2> accessed 12/21/23.

The journey for María and José is long, difficult and dangerous. They must travel through many countries with little protection. They sleep in the rain and eat whatever food they can afford, scavenge or beg. Finally, they arrive in Matamoros, Mexico, on the edge of the Rio Grande River, across the US border from Brownsville, Texas.

They ask a US board patrol officer for asylum in the United States from their life in Venezuela, stating they cannot make enough to live in Venezuela and are not safe there. They are given some papers to fill out and told to stand in a long line with other migrants who are seeking asylum. *There must be 500 people*, José notices. He and María stand in line for hours and are told there are not enough security officers to process so many people, so they must wait. They are exhausted and hungry. Then María goes into labor. She can no longer stand, so she sits on the dry and dirty ground. Someone near them in line gives María a bottle of water to drink. She is incredibly grateful.

Soon a security officer notices that María is lying on the ground in the line. He takes pity on her and invites María and José to come into a tent where volunteer medics are helping sick patients. When the medics realize María is growing too weak to withstand her contractions, they put her in a nearby car, and she and José are taken to a nearby makeshift hospital where she is offered a cot to lie down. She is given IV fluids, and two hours later, María gives birth to a healthy but small baby girl. The couple name her Esperanza, which means hope in Spanish.

María and José are fictional characters. I made up their story, but it doesn't mean this story is not real. It is all too real for many Marías and Josés out there in Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Turkey, Ukraine, Syria, and Gaza, in addition to many unsafe Latin and South American countries.

What is similar about María and José's story and our Christmas Eve story of Mary and Joseph? A ruler who chooses power and greed over helping those for which he works. A young mother who is pregnant. A young father who is concerned about the woman he cares for and the child. A long and unsafe journey. A crowded town with many people in flux. No good place to have a baby. This same story is happening today all over our world. Only the names have been changed.

One might think, nothing has changed in over 2000 years. How does a weary world rejoice? For what do we hold out hope? What is hope amidst the despair and suffering in our world?

Let me suggest that hope is paying attention; paying attention to where God is at work in our world: through the prophets, through the song of angels, through the guiding star. God is always at work in our world. This hope is all around us, in good and difficult times. We must pay attention.

There is another side to this coin. We must pay attention to where help is needed and provide hope to others. The innkeeper saw Mary and Joseph's need; he provided the only thing he could offer, his stable, however humble. The lady in line saw María in distress and gave her possibly the only thing she could offer, water. The security officer saw María and José's need; he took them to the medical tent; from there they were taken to a place where they could find care. We are called to be that light of hope in our world today. Our help can be very humble and simple; it can be the only thing we can offer at the time; and, it may not be exactly what someone needs, but lead to that which is perfect. We must trust that God takes our effort and our love and multiplies it.

The story of Jesus is the story of hope itself. Why? A child conceived in an extraordinary way; living a life in direct opposition to the culture of his day; despite only loving people and acting as God would act, he is accused of blasphemy, tried as a criminal, and abandoned by all his friends; yet, his way of love conquered the fear and malice that tried to kill him. His life, death, and resurrection show us that God is always at work in our world creating hope. Hope may not be handed to us on a silver platter, but it is visible in small and big ways.

Hope. We need it and we need to give it away to others. Where is hope available in your own life? Are you paying attention to the singing angels, to the person offering you the gift of water? What have you received that has offered you hope? What have you given to offer the gift of hope to others?

Tonight hope is here in this place, at this table. Here we are invited to find hope, relationship, spiritual nourishment, and life. We have been called by name to be here. God feeds us with the food that will never leave us hungry. That food is hope...hope that reminds us that God is always working in our world to bring about good.

Oh, little town of Bethlehem  
 How still we see thee lie.  
 Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
 The silent stars go by.  
 Yet in that dark street shineth  
 The everlasting light.  
 The hopes and fears of all the years  
 Are met in thee tonight. Amen.