

“Reckless Love”
Rev. Rebecca Simpson
Matthew 24:36-44; Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13: 11-14
November 27, 2022

There were thugs in the street. At least that’s what it felt like. Young men, aimless and on edge, leaning on cars, furtively scanning their surroundings, watching for threat, and opportunity to threaten. Men with nothing good to do, looking for trouble. And there were little boys roaming everywhere, very little boys, pushing packs of gum into your hands as you walked by then asking for money. They looked up at you with puppy dog eyes that were somehow hardened, an aggressive sales tactic or a ploy so they could be close enough to pick your pocket. The little boys, though small and vulnerable, were watching the men, learning quickly how to navigate the mean streets, with clearly no hope for a better life.

And then there were rocks. Big ones, like soft balls and soccer balls, everywhere. Those were the rocks people threw when they stoned someone. Soccer ball sized rocks, from above, from up on the hilltop, thrown down at the cars as they went by on the road below. Used as deadly weapons on police vehicles which were hopelessly protected by metal cages over their windows, scarred with 12 inch dents on the roof and hood, from the rocks, and the men, and the little boys. This was our short walk from the bus to the church in the city of Bethlehem in 2015.

I was the most uneasy for this leg of my tour of Israel, it lasted barely 24 hours, but it felt like an eternity. It was hard when we were further north in the Golan Heights where we could hear bombs banging in the distance, falling just over the boarder in Syria. It was unnerving when we were shuffled quickly from venue to venue, keeping us behind barriers and gates for as long as possible before fast-walking into the next museum in the city of Jerusalem. But it actually felt dangerous in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is under Palestinian Authority, and it's not a friendly place for Christians, and it is down right dangerous for Jews. The threat was palpable when we went to lunch at a restaurant hidden behind 12 foot tall, solid metal gates and when we toured the church built over the traditional site of Christ's birth. A church within whose sanctuary there had been a huge fist fight the day before, a fist fight between two priests ... Our Palestinian-Christian owned and operated hotel was opulent, but empty except for our small group of 20 Canadians because their tourism industry is dead. Everyone is afraid to go to Bethlehem. Our tour guides had to tell us about the basement where we were to go should there be bombing.

Bethlehem. The site of Jesus's birth. The place where the animals gathered and the angels sang. The place to which the new star in the sky drew the attention of wise scholars from the east. The place where gentle and faithful Mary cozied up to her new born baby under the watchful eye of steadfast Joseph. The place where the shepherds paid homage to the baby king, the

light of the world. These aspects of the Christmas story have shaped our impressions of Bethlehem. We've warmed them over, watched them play out year after year in soft focus by candle light and to the sound of beautiful carols.

These classic Christmas story hallmarks of warmth and comfort bear little resemblance to the reality of today's Bethlehem and no resemblance at all to ancient Bethlehem.

Do you want to know what I thought of the shocking reality of the place where the Saviour of the world was born?

I thought, of course this is where Jesus was born. He was born into a land in desperate need of peace. What better place to birth the Light of God's love than in the darkness of human hurt and harm. A place where, in the time of his birth, the Roman Empire held power over their world by oppressive military might, a place where the religious elite were hypocritical and unfaithful to God. A place where, in all the thousands of years since, there has been hatred, strife, war and upheaval. When I was faced with the harsh dangerous reality of Bethlehem I thought, of course this is where God chose to come to us as a vulnerable, powerless baby.

See our God is a God of reckless love. In the birth of Jesus Christ, God does something that makes no human sense, God takes on flesh and blood and becomes a powerless, helpless, dependant baby. A baby who cries and needs to be fed and diapered.

A baby who grows into a man, experiencing along the way all that human flesh brings with it, the joys and the sorrows and the risk. In order to show God's extreme love for humanity, God comes to us in Jesus Christ.

No other would dare to enter into the dangerous, hate-filled world, in the center of military invasion and religious tension, in the form of one who by necessity needs human love to live, a tiny vulnerable baby. But that's the God we meet in Jesus Christ. The God who risks it all to show God's love for us. Jesus brings the reckless passionate love of God to us when he walks along side us, feels the same pain as we do, hungers and suffers, is humiliated and feels fear like us. God dared to enter onto the stage of human life in the most meek form possible, all for the sake of drawing us into his love.

If his birth as a baby was not a clear enough expression of God's love for us, 30 or so years later Jesus submitted to the humiliating and painful suffering of the cross, laying his life down for his friends, that all who call on him might have eternal life. Why on earth would God do such a strange thing for us? Because God is love and God wants to spend himself, wants to spend that love, on us.

Over the next four weeks we re-enter the anticipation of the coming of Jesus Christ. In advent we recount his birth and we renew our expectation of Christ's coming again to finalize the fullness of God's commonwealth here on earth. In this affluent

place, where we live in relative peace, many of us will be tempted to let our advent preparations chase romantic soft-focus Hallmark movie appearances. But the prophet Isaiah foretold a time when swords would be useless and people would be focused on feeding each other and need more ploughs to farm. Imagine the stones of Palestine being stones again, not weapons. Imagine that God, the righteous judge sorts out all the nations and so they LEARN war no more.

The boys in the streets of Bethlehem have no choice but to learn war and hate right now. But imagine in Christ's coming again, those boys will instead play in the streets, their bellies full of the food they need, their fathers living in peace with all the other nations that surround them. Now a threat, then a friendship. Now a slow and violent war seething under the surface, ready to break out at any spark, then a transformation of hearts and minds, bodies delivered from pain and harm into health and peace. This is what is at stake in the season of advent. This advent could be the time when Christ comes again. So wake up!

Shake up that stifled Christ-centered hope laying dormant inside of you – for you are Christ-followers! You are Christ-expectors! You've been given the heads up that Christ is coming so best get to preparing. What's to be done in our communities of faith to make sure Christ's house is in order? What do you hope Jesus catches you doing, you individually, and you collectively, when he comes? Now's the time to get on it!

This advent, savour the anticipation of the One promised thousands of years before his birth to set the world on a course for peace. Dare to expect the One by whom the world received the hope of the Kingdom, the Commonwealth of God, an alternate way of being, a place now alive and growing on earth where the first will be last and the peacemakers will be called children of God. A place where a righteous God bears our sins so that we may have the reward of freedom. A place where the birth of the Saviour King is announced first to the rubby dubby shepherds in the dark fields, a place where all are called from North, South, East and West to bow down and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, in the midst of a cattle stall.