

Release and Deliverance  
Matthew 1:18-25  
First Presbyterian Church  
December 18, 2016  
Rev. Glen Bell

Madeleine L'Engle, the gifted author, wrote this touching poem, "The Risk of Birth."

*This is no time for a child to be born.  
With the earth betrayed by war and hate  
And a comet slashing the sky to warn  
That time runs out and the sun burns late.*

*That was no time for a child to be born.  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn.  
Yet here did the Savior make his home.* \*\*\*

*When is the time for love to be born? \*\*\*  
The inn is full on the planet earth.  
And by a comet the sky is torn.  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.* \*\*\*

This is no time for love to be born. Aleppo lies devastated and in ruins. Palmyra has fallen again to the so-called Islamic State. Our nation is divided after a fractious national election. Doubt and distrust and fear seem to have the upper hand.

It surprises us today to be reminded the fear was a key part of the events leading up to the incarnation. Mary and Joseph were engaged but not yet married, when she was found to be pregnant. Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly. An angel of the Lord appeared and encouraged Joseph to release his fears, to take Mary as his wife, to raise this Holy Child, born of the Spirit, as his own.

Christmas comes when we are afraid. Not when everything is perfect and pretty, united and whole, healed and completed.

It may surprise us today to be reminded that Christmas is about salvation. We may have let go of that kind of language in relation to our faith. To be honest, we may have distanced ourselves from the language of rescue and redemption, salvation and deliverance. But the angel reminds Joseph and us that Jesus is born into a broken world, a world of warfare and division and doubt, a world in which we fall short and fail every day. We need a Savior.

The salvation that Christ offers is not triumph over our enemies. It is not the vindication and justification of our own political perspectives. No, it is rooted in mercy and forgiveness, the divine grace that empowers us to love others.

Love still takes the risk of birth, today and every day, because we work for redemption and deliverance in the world in honor of the One who is still saving, still rescuing, still forgiving us and our neighbors.

This promise of salvation in the midst of fear becomes the name of the Holy Child. This promise of salvation in the midst of fear and brokenness is Emmanuel, God with us.

God is with us, so we light the candles in a world of darkness.

God is with us, so we sing Jubilate Deo even as our loved one is in the midst of chemo.

God is with us, so we come joyful and triumphant, even though all we sometimes see before us is death and destruction and division.

God is with us, so we sing with voices loud and clear – for only love can conquer fear.

Do not be afraid.

Rest in the promise of salvation.

For God is with us.