

**Kailua Christian Church**  
**Sunday Worship - December 24, 2023**  
**Pastor Irene Willis Hassan**  
**“The Work of Christmas”**

**Scripture readings:**

**Luke 2:8-15**

**8** Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** 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: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, **14** “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”  
**15** 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.”

**Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7**

**2** The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
**3** You have multiplied exultation;  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders,  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
**7** Great will be his authority,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

**Sermon: The Work of Christmas**

Today, Christmas Eve, we wait with excitement. Children are waiting for the abundance of gifts tomorrow morning. Aunties, uncles, grandmas and grandpas are waiting to celebrate

Christmas dinner with their families. Moms are waiting for the glorious moment in which she can sit back and enjoy the fruits of her labor with a cup of coffee. Dads are waiting for their kids to open their presents so they can play with them together. We wait with excitement to celebrate not only these sacred moments of joy with our families, but also with God who has redeemed the world through the arrival of His Son, Jesus.

The last statement I just made, about our excitement of the arrival of Christ among us, is debatable. Many families have decided they don't need Christ to celebrate the Joy of Christmas, and with good reason. What difference does it make? Why do we need Jesus to experience the joy of togetherness? Yes, Jesus came into the world – but He didn't stop the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Yes, Jesus came into the world – but we still have suffering and poverty almost everywhere we look. This “endless peace” prophesied in Isaiah has not taken place. We can experience the Joy of Christmas morning without the illusion that Jesus made a difference in achieving that Joy, can't we?

For many families in our post-Christian world, Christmas is about carving out space for magic, joy, and hope in the dead of winter. That concept is relatable, whether or not a Jewish boy was born in a cave in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. Yes, we'll take the joy; yes, we'll take the hope; yes, we'll take the peace – and we don't need the weird Bible story with angels and cave births and mass slaughter of babies to make those things valuable on Christmas morning. This is the understanding that my generation has when we open our presents around a tree without ever going to church or opening a Bible.

People who have taken Christ out of Christmas have a point, because the “endless peace” promised in Isaiah never arrived. As we highlighted last week during our Blue Christmas service, the holiday season is not filled with Joy for everyone. Not all children will wake up to presents tomorrow. Some grandmas are mourning the loss of their husbands and their children are grown, and they have nowhere to go on Christmas morning. Many in Lahaina don't have a home anymore in which to set up a tree, open presents, and invite family. There's been no “endless peace” promised by Isaiah, so why should we complicate the joy of family gatherings over presents and ham on Christmas day with a story that simply isn't true? The Biblical Christmas story of triumph over evil doesn't seem to align with the reality of the world.

This year in Bethlehem, the city where Jesus was born, Christmas has been canceled. The Church of the Nativity – His birthplace – lies empty. Bethlehem's Manger Square doesn't have its iconic parade or festive light displays. Instead, the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem has set up a nativity display in which the baby Jesus lies among the rubble of a destroyed building, reflecting the images we see on the news of lifeless children being pulled from the destruction of Gaza. Bethlehem, the city where Jesus was born, finds no Joy in the birth of Christ this Christmas. What difference makes the Prince of Peace and Joy coming into the world, if 2,000 years later there is no Peace or Joy in the very place He was born?

Rev. Munther Isaac, the Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church of Bethlehem, explained in an interview why he chose to provide such a brutal nativity scene in the place of the Christmas story. He said that we mistake ourselves in sanitizing Jesus's birth, making an

event sparkly that was actually quite tense. Jesus was born in a dirty cave under the vicious occupation of the Roman Empire, not into a safe, warm household with abundance of gifts and honeyed ham on the table. Rev. Munther says that if we truly want to recognize Christmas, we recognize it in the widow spending her first Christmas alone, we recognize it in the child whose parents can't afford Christmas presents, we recognize it in the Lahainan who has no home with a tree. We recognize it in the dying baby pulled from the rubble in Gaza. We recognize it in the terrified woman fleeing Hamas's scourge on her village.

I looked at pictures of Rev. Munther's devastating nativity, and held his words about Jesus being born into a suffering world close to my heart. There is so much pain in the world and it seems perverse to sing for Joy at the coming of a baby who promised to heal all of it, a promise that has not yet come to fruition.

We could follow the logic of our secular friends that Christmas has magic, hope, and love in it, regardless of that unfulfilled promise for peace. We could treat Christmas as a grateful pause to recognize these beautiful aspects of life, and then go back to our normal lives as soon as the tree is taken down and the lights dismantled. However, as Rev. Munther points out, Christmas isn't meant to be a pause in the wretchedness of life on earth – *Jesus came to be intimately part of it*. You can't shove all that hope and goodwill into a single day and then go back to your everyday life like that moment didn't have pervasive meaning for everything else that you do.

The work of Christmas is in exactly what Rev. Munther displays in his nativity – the magic of Christmas lies in God's promise to free the captive, empower the oppressed, and transform the world. The magic of Christmas isn't a seasonal pause in acknowledgement of joy and thanksgiving, it's a call to lift those babies out of the rubble. It's a call to hold the hand of the woman slowly dying of MRSA in her tent on Waimanalo beach. It's a call to rebuild Lahaina for the people of Lahaina with every dollar we can spare, and more.

We do need to see the baby Jesus in context of the suffering he was born into, and not just the holiday lights and sparkling joy of opening gifts on Christmas morning. For us Christians, the striving for "endless peace" isn't an idea that was let go of long ago when Jesus didn't come back immediately. The magic of Christmas isn't fleeting, a pause between activities of normal life. The magic of Christmas is remembering Him born in the stable that holy night 2,000 years ago and standing in awe of a God who so loved the world that He was willing to come be with us, suffer alongside us to the point of gruesome death, and show us the way into resurrection, day after every day since that blessed birth.

The "endless peace" promised by Jesus' birth is a call to bravely continue, even when the rest of the world says give up. Jesus asked us to have faith in Him, and that faith would transform the world. He didn't give us the easy way out by gift wrapping Christmas into one resolute morning 2,000 years ago. He expects us to follow Him into the dark, bringing the joyful light of Christmas everywhere we go until His work is finally fulfilled.

The magic of Christmas is tomorrow. The magic of Christmas is also the day after, and the day after. The magic of Christmas is a bleak morning in February, or a sunny day in June, or

any day in which we make the faithful decision to follow Him into setting the captive free and empowering the oppressed among us.

The words of Howard Thurman, a civil rights activist who mentored Martin Luther King while he was in theology school at my Alma Mater, Boston University, echo in my mind as we go into this most sacred night, anticipating the joy of tomorrow. May the joy of tomorrow translate into courage for every day thereafter that is blessed by the Christmas Magic:

“The Work of Christmas” by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart.

Amen.

