

January 5, 2014

TEXT: Genesis 1:1-5; Matthew 2:7-18

TITLE: The Shadows of Christmas

The bible begins with this verse in Genesis: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, the opening of that verse goes like this: *Bereshit bara Elohim et ha-shamayim v'et ha-aretz*. And when it says that the earth was formless and void, of chaos and darkness, it says this: *V'ha-aretz ha-y-ta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*.

The first act of creation by God was to separate order from chaos. Yet chaos remained. It was not destroyed in the creative process, which is important to remember. Though there was now the light of God's order, there was still darkness and shadows upon the face of the earth. God's will is strong enough to encompass both extremes, but chaos and order remain in opposition, even to this day.

In the fullness of time, the light of Christmas morning broke over the earth's horizon, and Christ the Savior was born. But the events of that first Christmas also contained elements of adversity that were far from chance misfortunes or bad luck. For the greater the light's power, the more the darkness tries to destroy it. So it is fair to say that in Bethlehem, the shadows of darkness moved once more over the face of the earth. *V'ha-aretz ha-y-ta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*.

1) It was the night of the Roman Empire. The descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had dwelt in darkness for over 500 years. Except for a brief period under the Maccabees and Hasmoneans, the Jews had long been a conquered and oppressed people. And now the land promised to the children of Abraham existed under the shadow of Rome.

Though the Hebrews had their temple and sacred writings, they were not free. Power resided with the Roman Empire, with its shrines to foreign gods and emperors worshiped as being divine, and legions of soldiers read to keep all opposition silent. Then a census was decreed in the land – a census to count the number of heads available for battle, and to count the number of wallets and purses to be emptied of their gold. In the darkness of the Roman night, the Israelites read Psalm 13 in the flickering candlelight and prayed, "How long, O Lord? Will Thou forget us forever?" But still the shadows moved over the face of the earth. *V'ha-aretz ha-y-ta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*. And there was evening and there was morning: the first day.

2) It was a quiet night in Nazareth. The angel had just left Mary's room and her eyes were slow in getting re-acclimated to the darkness. For the longest time she didn't move, as echoes of the angel's message rang in her ears. Mary was a young girl on the verge of womanhood, a maiden of earth touched by heaven. She longed to know what to do now – to get advice from someone. But how could she ever explain what she had seen and heard?

She was to bear a child. She, a virgin, was to become pregnant. Would her family believe her? Would Joseph believe her? The punishment for adultery was banishment, or worse, stoning. As she sat alone, the room seemed to be filled with her self-doubts and fears. She could almost hear the whispers of what others would say about her. So in the ominous darkness, she did all she could do. The young girl closed her eyes and she prayed. *V'ha-aretz ha-y-ta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*. And there was evening and there was morning: the second day.

3) Joseph lay in his bed, but he couldn't sleep. Earlier that day Mary had returned from her cousin Elizabeth's house. She had spoken of angels and God's blessing, and she was clearly pregnant. In the dark of his room, he could still see her face. He had never doubted her before; but this was too much to believe. The baby she carried was not his. The promises they had spoken earlier would have to be broken. Poor Mary. He would not publicly denounce her; he would find some way to quietly break their engagement.

In torment he kicked off the sheets and tried to think clearly, but it all came down to one fact: the child was not his. Their marriage must be called off. As he lay down exhausted, the shadows around him seemed to reassure him that he'd made the right decision. But as a dreaming sleep came over him, once again he saw her face. And a different answer came to his prayers. *V'ha-aretz ha-y-ta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*. And there was evening and there was morning: the third day.

4) The journey was supposed to be straightforward, but it seemed that everything came together to prevent the couple from reaching Bethlehem. They had to keep stopping along the way to allow Mary time to rest, which meant they only entered Bethlehem well after evening had fallen. Struggling down the winding, cobbled streets, the town was blanketed in darkness and all doors appeared bolted in their faces. Reaching an inn, Joseph broke the silence with his sharp knocks on the outer door. Mary's moan made him repeat his rapping until at last a light flickered on inside. The door was cracked open, but the innkeeper's face remained shrouded in shadows. Joseph spoke and pleaded but the man was unmoved. A nod towards a livestock shed was the only hope he offered. Then the door was shut; the light extinguished. The shadows covered them again. With a heavy sigh, Joseph helped his wife around the corner, struggling to find their way in the deep darkness. *V'ha-aretz ha-y-ta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*. And there was evening and there was morning: the fourth day.

5) King Herod was furious. The partial moon shining into his darkened chamber was sufficient to illuminate his rage. For days he had paced around, awaiting word from the Wise Men who had passed through seeking a Child-King. Herod had pointed them in the direction of Bethlehem; now he had been informed that they had been seen leaving Bethlehem heading south – away from Jerusalem, away from Herod's palace.

Something had happened – but what? Perhaps the prophecy had come true – a king had been born, a challenger to his throne and power. Herod flung open his chamber door and called for the captain of the guard. In the hallway, lit by flickering lamps with sooty trails of black smoke, he instructed the captain to send a division of soldiers that

very night to Bethlehem, to kill every male child under two years of age. Shaken by the order, the captain had no choice but to obey. And soon, Herod scowled with pleasure as he heard the sound of the soldier's sandals marching double-time out the city gate, out into the darkness of the night. *V'ha-aretz ha-y-ta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*. And there was evening and there was morning: the fifth day.

6) In the darkness of night, Joseph woke up suddenly from his sleep. He nudged Mary and told her of what he had just dreamed. Lighting a small candle, she quickly packed their possessions while he went out to saddle up the donkey. The baby awoke briefly and cried, sensing the disruption. But once they were on their way, he settled down to sleep. Both Mary and Joseph, however, were far from peaceful.

Mary trusted her husband's dream, yet wondered what it all meant. Why must they flee so far from Nazareth, from her family and home? How long must they stay away? Why would God send them into a foreign land and strange culture now? Slowly Bethlehem receded in the distance and disappeared as something like a black shroud blotted out the stars overhead. Mary trembled and thought she heard the sound of a mother's anguished cry piercing the night. Then she remembered the words of the prophet Jeremiah: *A voice is heard in Ramah. Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted*. She held her boy-child closely as they rode on into the night. *V'ha-aretz ha-y-ta tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*. And there was evening and there was morning: the sixth day.

7) We are together today on the first Sunday of a new year. A snow-covered creation unfolds around us – a world of light and shadows. Into this world Jesus the Christ was born and he reigns as the Lord of all life. But the world into which he was born contained both shepherds offering him praise and soldiers seeking his death as they followed Herod's genocidal orders. The gospel story we tell over and over again contains a wooden manger and a wooden cross, both destined for the same occupant.

Yet the faith we profess is unabashedly realistic and confident. It is realistic enough to name that our world is full of light and shadows, order and chaos. Yes, we are quick to resort to violence, to accept poverty and injustice as the norm, to withdraw from God and one another. That tension exists in every nation, in every neighborhood, and honestly in every beating heart. Each day we either light candles or blow them out. We are realistic about that.

But for evil and chaos to win, we have to intentionally choose the ways of darkness and fear, believing that the earth (*v'ha-aretz*) is truly formless, void, and chaotic (*tohu va-vohu, v'choshech*). That path would require us to disregard the real truth, what our hearts and souls know to be trustworthy – that the power of darkness is transient. It has no ultimate authority. God's true light, the Word made flesh, has come into the world and the darkness has not overcome it.

In a world of shadows, we are Christ's confident people of the light. Go forth and live this truth. Tell the gospel story. Show mercy and hospitality. Love God. Love one another. And then the wisdom of the creation pattern first revealed in the Genesis story will be clear to you. There is evening and shadows, yes; but there is always light and morning – the Lord's Day. Thanks be to God!