

12.24.20 CE God Sent Even More than a Train

- Once again this year, the people of Boston lit the lights on a very special Christmas Tree at the Boston Common
 - This very special Christmas tree was a gift – a gift from the people of Nova Scotia to the people of Boston
 - And let me tell you, this gift of a tree is a very big deal
 - Throughout Nova Scotia, a tree scout looks all year for the perfect tree that is to be selected and given to Boston each year
 - And it is considered a great honor if one of your trees is the one that is chosen, and then with great pomp and ceremony it is cut down, carefully bundled and put on a freight train
 - So why does Nova Scotia go to all this trouble to select, ship, and send the gift of a Christmas tree to Boston of all places?
 - It's a lot of money to ship a single tree
 - And there are many cities closer to Nova Scotia than Boston – Boston is over 750 miles away!
- Why?
- Because back in 1917 in the harbor city of Halifax in Nova Scotia, a ship filled with ammunition collided with another ship, caught fire, and then exploded
 - That explosion was so powerful that the water in the harbor was pushed outward in a 60-foot tsunami that wiped out a small coastal village across the harbor
 - Every building in Halifax within one-and-a-half-miles of the explosion was destroyed, and the half-ton anchor from one of the ships was hurled into the air and landed over 2 miles away
 - Of course, the loss of life was terrible – over 1700 people were killed that morning
- News of the explosion in Halifax went out over the telegraph, and the city of Boston over 750 miles away was able to push the very first relief train through deep snow to bring medical supplies and medical relief workers to the devastated city
- And that's why to this day, the city of Halifax sends a Christmas tree to the people and city of Boston
- The Halifax explosion was terrible, and the descendants of survivors still give thanks for Boston's help and comfort

- Of course on this Christmas Eve, we know that Christmas is about more than a Christmas Tree
 - But in a much bigger sense, Christmas is still about the arrival of aid, comfort, and more...
 - In the gospel of Luke an angel of God announced to the lowly shepherds, "...I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. [2:10-11]."
 - A Savior!
 - A Savior literally means someone who saves
 - The shepherds, and the people of that day, and we as part of the people of this day, would not need a Savior, we would not need saving, if everything was fine with the world, and fine with us
 - The truth of the matter is, Roman empire census or no Roman occupation of little Judea in Jesus's day... terrible explosion or no explosion in Halifax in 1917... or devastating pandemic or no pandemic today... the truth of the matter is that the world has always been in turmoil, and all of humanity down to each and every one of us has found ways to harm the world, hate our neighbors, or wound ourselves
 - And so Jesus the Savior was born because instead of sending a train filled with wonderful medical supplies and relief workers to our aid, God sent even more... God sent his Son
- It is not so much ironic, but instead it is somehow fitting, that God's infant son was born in a stable
 - Have you been to a barn filled with animals lately?
 - It smells!
 - And frankly not just the stable, but the world into which Jesus was born smells too – this world has always reeked of human destruction and the stench of death
 - But that is why the angels said that the birth of Jesus is Good News – because beginning with the birth of Jesus, the Savior Son of God brings the promise of peace to earth, and in his own cross and resurrection that same Savior wipes away the power of death
- This is the hope and promise of Christmas – Christ was born to save and change both us and the world

- And yet here we are today in the midst of an unimagined pandemic, and because of that, only four of us can gather here in the church building for Christmas worship
- Yet we can still worship wherever we are, and we can still give thanks for the birth of the Savior
- However, I know that this Christmas Eve and Christmas day is very different this year, and I'm sure all of us grieve that we have had to set aside so many Christmas traditions both at home and here at church this year
- In addition there is a deep sadness. Look back to the beginning of the pandemic. Then perhaps a few of us knew someone who had become terribly sick or died from the coronavirus – but now months later, all of us know someone has been sick, some of us have been seriously sick ourselves, and some of us know someone who has died
- And the scale of the pandemic by the time Christmas has arrived is sobering
- Remember that explosion back in 1917 when over 1700 people were killed in Halifax? In recent days the Covid pandemic has escalated to the point where twice that many people just in the United States alone, die of the virus each day!
 - This is a time of fear, and a time of its cousin denial
 - This is a time of anxiety, and a time numbness
 - This is a time of grief, and a time of a glimmer of hope with a vaccine
 - But most of all, let me remind you, that even now these days are a time to celebrate the coming of our Savior
- Christmas celebrates more than the birth of a cute baby, Christmas celebrates the birth of the Savior who comes to live in this troubled world in order to bring peace, and to bring life and salvation to hurting people in every generation including us here and now
- In thankfulness for the help that they received over a century ago, the people of Halifax still send a Christmas tree to Boston

- We don't need to show our thanks to God by giving a Christmas tree – after all, God is even the creator of the forests!
- But we can give thanks to God even in a pandemic, because the birth of Jesus reminds us again and again of God's great love for us and the world – and in this much lonelier Christmas Eve, in the midst of the tumult of the world and our lives, we can still dare to sing along with the angels the song of hope, “Glory to God in the highest.”