

Old South Church in Boston

December 24, 2018, 8pm

Candlelight Service of Lessons & Carols

A CHRISTMAS WORD by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister

It's been a tough year. It's been a tough, rough, bruising year on planet earth. Somebody say, "Amen." In fact, *The Oxford English Dictionary's* word of the year, word of 2018, sums it up. Who can name (this is not a rhetorical question) *The Oxford English Dictionary's* word for 2018? Yes! Toxic!

That's not the half of it. Toxic doesn't point to the 68 million people, world-wide, forcibly displaced from their homes. Or the plight of the planet: its oceans and air, its habitats and species. Or of the earth's murderous potentates: princes and presidents and prime ministers who ride roughshod over human rights.

It has been a tough year on planet earth. Somebody say, "God help us".

Here's why I think you came tonight, came to church tonight, bundled up against the chill air, left the warmth of hearth and home to come out to church tonight: because here, now, on this night, we sing and pray and read of something else, something better. On Christmas Eve we sing and pray and read of nothing less than a redeemed world.

In the hush of this evening's work, in the ceremony and mystery of it, in the scent of pine, in the gaiety of greenery and red poinsettias, in our songs ascending to the high rafters, in the invocation of a story dipped in silver and gold, a story of winged angels and dear shepherds, of ancient scholars searching the night sky and following a star, in the story of a girl (pregnant yet unmarried), in the story of a holy family (God's own family) made refugees by the murderous lust of a jealous potentate, in this story we gather to together to rehearse the prospect of a redeemed world, of a world frankly, patently, unlike the world in which we live.

We gather to rehearse the prospect of a world of peace and good will among all peoples. Amen? A world where the poor are treated as princes and the proud, the haughty – the ones who've got all the good stuff, who hoard the good stuff believing they deserve it – where the proud, the haughty are taken down and poor lifted up.

Here's why I think you came tonight: to breathe life into this story, this prospect of a redeemed world, a shining world where the poorest of the poor have food enough, and the sickest of the sick aren't suffering and dying for lack of medical attention; a world where disputes are settled by judges and laws, not weapons and bloodshed.

Here's why I think you came tonight: because this night's story makes, of a pregnant, unmarried teenaged girl, a hero and a model, instead of smearing her with shame.

Here's why I think you're here tonight: to cheer God on; to root for and to cheer on the God who loves the loveless, frees the captives, forgives the sinner.

This story we tell tonight, and sing tonight, this story wrapped in shining carols and splendid lessons, wrapped in shimmering anthems, this story revealed by the light of candles; by candles lit, defiantly, against the world's darkness, lit against all the world's cynicism, and barbarism, lit against the world's vulgarities, lit to shed light on, to reveal ugly isms: in this story are met the hopes and dreams of all the years. Somebody say, "Amen".

I think you're here tonight, because the world as you and I know it, is ungodly, unjust, and unfair. I think you're here tonight because you believe in justice and ache for fairness. And because here, now, in this night's story, we affirm and aver that if we humans fail at fairness and founder at justice on earth, at least we know God intends it, and will make it so in the world to come.

Look at the carol we are about to sing: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. It's a carol about peace on earth, and mercy, and sinners reconciled, and joyful nations. Joyful nations! You could say of this: Balderdash! Rubbish! Stuff and nonsense! Twaddle! What fairytale are you selling, Taylor? You could say: Wake up, Taylor. Smell the coffee. It's dog eat dog out there. It's vicious out there. It's red in tooth and claw out there. The rich win. The poor lose. You could say to me: Taylor, get a grip.

Or, you could say: on Christmas Eve the great prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, together with angels and magi, with peasant shepherds and an unwed teen-ager about to give birth... together and improbably, this rag-tag band paints the image of a redeemed world. And, I don't know about you, but as for me: I'm all in. Put me down for that! Sign me up. I'm planting stakes in *that* kind of world.

The world of Christmas Eve and Christmas morn, well, it's not unlike the image of this earth captured from the moon, from the astronauts of Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve fifty years ago tonight: the sight of our lovely planet, blue and green and spinning in the soft, deep, velvet darkness of space. It is an image of our planet as God willed it into being. It is an image that reveals our common human destiny on a fragile globe spinning in the dark of space.

The Oxford English Dictionary declares that the word of 2018 is "toxic." I get it. I've lived there for the past twelve months.

But, as much as I admire the OED, and I do (I'm a fan), it does not get the last or final word tonight. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* chose a different word of the year. This is a quiz! Can anyone name, or might you venture to guess, what *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* chose as the word for 2018? Right! "Justice!"

In 2018 "justice" was looked up more times at Merriam-Webster.com than any other word. The entry was consulted 74% more often than in 2017. This gives me hope.

The concept of justice was at the center of so many of our national debates in the past year: racial justice, social justice, criminal justice, economic justice, gender justice. This gives me hope.

Here's what Christians understand about justice. In our Bible – both in the Hebrew of the first Testament, and in the Greek of the New Testament – the biblical words meaning justice, also mean righteousness. In the biblical world view justice and righteousness are interchangeable and inseparable. They're the same thing. You cannot *be* righteous without *doing* justice. It's that simple. Well, it's that hard.

I think you're here tonight because you understand that we are locked in battle: the forces of evil (toxic forces), the forces of cruelty, of craven greed, and incivility are joined, are fighting against the forces of good: of justice, of righteousness, of equality, of kindness, of mercy.

If you're here tonight for *this* story, the story of this sorry world redeemed; if you're in, if you're willing to fight this fight, to join in this battle, God's battle, please say, "Amen!"

Now, let's get on with it!