

A Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond Virginia

by David H. Knight, Interim Rector

**Send your Spirit, God, to open our hearts and our minds to your word,
and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus' Name.**

Amen.

On this night some two thousand years ago, the cry of a newborn infant shattered the stillness of the night, and the world has never been the same.

Tonight once again, we gather to celebrate Christmas. For most of us, Christmas is a time full of memories of Christmases past. It is a time that for many is filled with childhood memories. For many it is a time to remember what now seem like simpler times. Many of you here tonight remember Christmases in this holy space. Christmas, perhaps as much as any holiday we observe, is full of nostalgia. It is a good thing to be able to look back and remember. For many, it is a time to remember loved ones who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom we are forever united. And as well, Christmas for some can be bittersweet.

Tonight once again, we sing the Christmas carols that connect us with those many memories and we hear again the words telling us of Jesus' birth as written in Luke's gospel. Luke proclaims the arrival of a new day that began with a quiet birth in a town witnessed by shepherds who were among the first to witness the arrival of this infant born in a stable. Again we hear the story, "And (Mary) gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Part of the beauty of this story is that it invites us to see Mary and Joseph as people much like us—trying to make their way in the world, squeezed by rising taxes and family demands, weary from a trip caused by a census in Syria and Palestine that decreed that all should be taxed. The demands upon that young couple are not all that different from the pressures you and I face in our own day. They stopped at the inn, hopeful for a good night's rest, but the inn was booked with other weary travelers so they were shown a place in the barn where they could rest for the night, and it was there that Mary had her baby.

Then, in that region where they stopped for that night, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people, to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'

Notice something about how the gospel passage began and how something changed: It began, “In *those* days...” But then as the angel announces Jesus birth, the angel says, “Do not be afraid... to you is born *this* day... a Savior. In those days people lived in fear then as we do now, yet tonight’s Gospel, which began with a story about what happened in those days then shifted to what happened on this day, for on this day in the city of David is born a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.

We are told that the first words that were said after the baby’s birth were words said by the angel. Those words were, “Do not be afraid.” So for us it is important to remember while in the midst of all that surrounds us, the message of the Messiah’s birth comes to us as a message of hope. With the Messiah’s birth comes for us a time characterized not by fear, but by the freedom and joy of the announcement, “Do not be afraid.” “Those days” are governed by fear. This day is brings the promise of hope. Charles Campbell, professor of homiletics (that’s another word for preaching) at Duke University reminds us that the political powers, both in Jesus’ day and in our own, play on fear to get their way—whether it be fear of the emperor, the fear of terrorists, the fear of immigrants, or the fear of death. But with “this” day comes a new possibility with those first words spoken after Jesus’ birth. Tonight’s message from the words of the angel moves us from the fears that grip us to the possibility that even in the midst of all that we face, we can find reason to be joyful and fear not. The turning point in tonight’s gospel occurs in one very understated verse: “And she gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in bands

of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

The words of Phillips Brooks who wrote the words to “O little town of Bethlehem” come to mind and I invite you to reflect upon them as we sing that hymn during Communion tonight. “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.” So often, so often indeed, it is silently that our fears are assuaged, and we find peace in the midst of our fears.

The holy mystery of this Christmas Eve is perhaps most of all the fact that the quiet birth of Jesus is the pivotal moment in the story which is your story, my story.

As you take time tonight to remember Christmases past, Christmases celebrate at services here in this sacred space, look with hope to the days to come, to the Christmases to come in future years here in this sacred space as well. What will they be like? What might this church look like as calls you into new avenues of mission and ministry? What will this church be like in the years to come? How will what happened in a stable in Bethlehem continue to shape your future as a parish?

And let us not lose heart as we look around us at what is happening in the nation and in the world, for we must never lose hope. Let us pray that we may witness to your call for peace and justice and that we may as best we can, by the way we live, proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. God grant us the gift of being able to hope even in the midst of all that life brings, and may we vessels of that hope to one another.

May you each have a blessed Christmas and may we hold close in our hearts the message that is eternal. It is that the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. *Amen.*