

A Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2014

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond Virginia

By David H. Knight, Interim Rector

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still
The dear Christ enter in.

O holy child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us we pray;
Cast out our in, and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel.

I can't remember many of the sermons that I have heard or preached over the years but etched in my brain forever are the words with which David Evans, the rector of St. Paul's Church in Holyoke, Massachusetts where I began my ministry as a priest, opened his Christmas Eve sermon. It was some 44 years or so but his words have left a vivid image in my brain. He simply began his sermon that Christmas Eve, "The cry of a tiny infant shattered the stillness of that night and the world has never been the same."

Once again tonight, we hear the familiar and beloved words in Luke's Gospel that tell us of the birth of the Christ child. *"...the time came for (Mary) to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her first born and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in the manger because there was no room for them in the inn."*

A blessed Christmas to all of you as we gather here tonight in this sacred space so beautifully adorned for this holy season. While I have not been here with you long, I sense a loving spirit among you in this place. It is palpable. Thank you for being here tonight and for all that you bring—your memories of Christmases of the past, your joys and your sorrows, the people you love who are with you tonight, and the people you love who you miss, your work done and left undone, your gratitude for the blessings you have received and your hopes for a better day—all is your gift which you bring with you tonight as we gather together in the holy darkness of this night.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus tells how a travel-weary couple went to be registered and when they were told that there was no room in the inn for them to stay, they found a space in a manger, a barn behind the inn where she would give birth to her baby. There was no need for visitors yet visitors would come. They would be shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then, an angel of the Lord stood before them and gave them news that would bring joy to all people that just born this night in the city of David a savior, who was to be the Messiah, the Lord. Now shepherds in those days were held in low esteem and hardly the ones that we would expect to be the bearers of such earth-changing news, and they would be the ones who would be led to the manger telling on their way to the manger the good news to everyone in their path.

Part of the wonder and the mystery of this Christmas story is that in a city where there was apparently no room for God to enter with the gift of the birth of God' Son, God still found a way to enter the city. In that same spirit God continues to enter the world in which we live, to bring that precious, life-giving gift. Ever since that night, it has often seemed that there has been no room for God to break through and enter, yet God has continued to come into this broken world in mysterious ways. God has sent Jesus to us to help us, you know, to be with us in all the trials and tribulations we face, to be with us in all the joys and the sorrows that we experience. At the heart of the Christmas story for us is the question, "Will there be room in our hearts for him?"

Frederick Buechner has written about the birth of Jesus that "Once we have seen God in a stable, we never know where we might see him again. If God is present in this least suspicious place, there is no place or time so lowly or earthbound but that holiness can be present, too. For just when God seems the most helpless, God is the most strong; and just when we least expect him that he comes most fully."

For a very long time now, one of my spiritual heroes has been a man named Phillips Brooks. He was an Episcopal priest many years ago and later became a bishop in Massachusetts. He also was the one who wrote the words of "O little town of Bethlehem." I want to leave you tonight with what he said in his Christmas sermon of 1903 because what he said those many years ago is every bit as true for us tonight as it was then. He said to the faithful that night at Christmas many years ago,

"And now once more comes Christmas Day. Once more, borne abroad on the words of simple minded shepherds, runs the story. God and (Humanity) have met, in visible actual union, in a life which is both human and divine. . . . Lift up yourselves to the great meaning of the day, and dare to think of your Humanity as something so sublimely precious that it is worthy of being made an offering to God. Count it a privilege to make that offering as complete as possible, keeping nothing back, and then go out to the pleasures and duties of your life, having been truly born anew into His Divinity, as he was born into our Humanity, on Christmas Day."