

“IN DARK STREETS SHINETH,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, December 28, 2020

Congregation, today is already the third day of the twelve day Christmas season. We will soon arrive at the brand new season of Epiphany, which begins on Three Kings Day, January 6. But there's no reason to rush ahead. Instead, better to savor Christmas for as long as we can and rejoice in the sacred birth it enshrines. Reading anew the birth narratives found in the gospel helps—as in our reading this morning from the Gospel of Luke. But so does singing all the precious carols of the season. This year, because of all the limitations posed by the COVID crisis, I didn't quite get my fill. Did you?

When it comes to Christmas carols, I'm pretty indiscriminate. I love them all. But there are a few I count as extra-precious. Among them is “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Although it has some very stiff competition, no carol better relates the meaning of the Bethlehem nativity. There's an interesting story behind it.

The words to “Little Town of Bethlehem” were penned by Phillips Brooks. He was a very prominent Episcopal minister, who presided over the massive Trinity Church in downtown Boston in the 1860s. Granted a sabbatical leave by his congregation for fall and winter of 1865, Brooks decided to make a visit to the Holy Land at Christmas. He made Jerusalem his base. However, under a starry night-time sky on Christmas Eve he rode out on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem which served as birthplace for both King David and Jesus.

Over the five and a half miles of rugged terrain separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem, there were many twists and turns. Yet, suddenly, over a hill and round a bend, Phillips Brooks caught sight of his destination. It was nestled in a valley below, rendered visible in the dark by just a smattering of distant house lanterns. Bethlehem at last!

Reverend Brooks was awed and thrilled. Yet as he rode his steed still closer to Bethlehem and then entered the town, he was a little disappointed too. Jesus' birthplace had loomed so large in his own mind. But it was far more humble than he ever imagined it would be. Ultimately, it was this paradox between the Bethlehem anticipated and the Bethlehem found that prompted the words of his beloved carol.

As Phillip Brooks describes it, Bethlehem, the birthplace of Israel's fabled King David a thousand years earlier, is now just a “little town” given over to “deep and dreamless sleep.” Like the rest of Israel, it is a place of shriveled hope without vision and expectation. However, in this humble hamlet of poorly illumined streets, beset with human disappointment and despair, an “everlasting light” suddenly beams and the destiny of humankind is forever changed with all the “hopes and fears of all the years” met, confronted, and answered. Throughout the rest of the carol, Reverend Brooks tells

the story of how Jesus, a “wondrous gift” to humankind from God, is born of his mother Mary in Bethlehem as angels keep watch and stars offer their own vigil.

As Reverend Brooks tells it, Jesus makes his earthly appearance as Savior so quietly that the rest of sleeping Bethlehem doesn’t even realize what is happening. Ironically, the local people nearly miss out on the biggest event in their town’s history—far bigger and more blockbuster than even King David’s birth there! Likewise, in the verses which follow Phillips Brooks further suggests that Jesus continues to manifest himself so simply and noiselessly in the lives of the faithful that others not so faithful may not notice at all.

As Reverend Brooks more poetically expresses it, “No ear may hear Christ’s coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.” This is clearly a reference to Jesus’ cherished teaching in the Sermon on the Mount where he proclaims “the meek” blessed, “for they shall inherit the earth.” It also aligns with Jesus’ later pronouncement that the “first will be last and the last will be first,” (*Matthew 20:14-16*) Thus, Phillips Brooks reminds us that God in Christ always favors the humble over the haughty, the arrogant, and the egotistical—in other words, those who genuinely realize and acknowledge their need for God’s help.

Phillips Brooks finishes his splendid carol with a humble prayer for us all, referring to Jesus as “Emmanuel,” meaning “God with us.” As his last verse pleads: “O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; cast out our sin, 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 God, Emmanuel.” These words underscore how important it is for men and women like us to open ourselves to the loving spirit of Jesus so that we might become a less selfish, self-serving people all-around.

Phillips Brooks’ prayer was particularly heart-felt. As a pastor and citizen, he had just witnessed the American nation undergo the trauma of the Civil War, which, finishing up only eight months earlier, then held the record for being the bloodiest conflict in the annals of human history. Led by economic self-interest, above any commitment to morality and justice, half of America had waged a fierce battle to keep four million African Americans enslaved. That enslaved population represented a whopping full third of the South’s total population. As he called upon Jesus’ help, Reverend Brooks knew that America not only needed justice for all, but real peace and reconciliation after all the cannons had stopped booming and no more battle cries were to be heard in the land. Yes, America, facing a kind of national post-traumatic stress syndrome, needed both deliverance and healing from injustice, lingering rancor, and memories of the most terrible violence that only the grace of Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace can make possible.

Obviously, in the last generation, our nation has not undergone anything as physically violent and brutal as a Civil War. Yet the words of Phillips Brooks' carol, responding to the upheaval, torments, and struggles of his own day, remain from first to last as resonant and relevant as ever. In an era when we are beset by worries brought on by the COVID crisis, there can be a grimness to our circumstances too. We are all witnesses to an erosion of trust and a growing frustration and unrest that seems to be polarizing and dividing us in a half dozen different ways with hopes being swamped by fears. People are quicker to anger and act on rash impulse, giving vent to all kinds of venomous opinions and deeds that tear at our nation's social fabric and sense of common purpose and togetherness. And we see breakdowns and dysfunction in major social institutions that once seemed so reliable and stabilizing. Amid this litany of troubles, has God's redemptive help and guidance ever been needed more? We can all use some of that "everlasting Light" of Christ which spiritually illuminated the dark streets of Bethlehem so long ago!

At Bethlehem, as Reverend Brooks celebrates, God came to us as a baby. Or, to put it another way, God incarnated himself in the world as the baby Jesus, assuming body and flesh. Through all this, God's intention was that we might directly see and experience his divine love and righteousness in a persuasive, life-changing way that Israel's earlier prophets--for all their proclamations of wisdom and truth--were not able to convincingly express or communicate to us. In this act of incarnation at Bethlehem, God revealed, among other things, what we might call the "incarnational principle." That "incarnational principle" is, namely, this: God's love is most credible when it is incarnated and embodied in everyday real-life, down-to-earth circumstances.

Of course, as I talked about Christmas Eve from this sanctuary, the "incarnational principle" applies to human love too. Human love is only believable when it is likewise embodied, demonstrated, and shared by us in tangible, caring ways. Just as God incarnated himself in Jesus to show his abiding love for humankind, he, by his very example, calls upon us to lovingly engage and involve ourselves with others, replicating and sharing the love that he made visible through the everyday life and ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. In this way, we pass on the "light of Christ" that first shone at Bethlehem.

In the face all of its confusion and troubles, our nation can benefit by seeing faithful Christian men and women like us, grounded in a sense of goodwill and moral integrity and filled with unselfish concern for others. By incarnating and re-incarnating the spirit of Christ, by more consistently than ever making his loving and righteous way our flesh and blood way of life each day, we can and do serve as leaven for another kind of nation and world that better honors God's purposes for our lives individually and together.

While skeptics, who don't take Jesus' coming seriously, may doubt and dismiss what we can accomplish, we should never underestimate the larger impact which our own incarnational commitment to be caring, compassionate, and righteous people in the name of Christ can have. As the Christmas story of a vulnerable baby born in a small town only underscores, God can do incredible things in the most humble circumstances if the hearts of a few people are in the right place and there is love for him and others.

In these days of the Christmas season, just as Phillips Brooks prayed in his beautiful carol, let's acknowledge our need for Jesus. Setting aside those selfish impulses that lend themselves to sin and sinning, may we each open our hearts and minds in a fresh way to the loving spirit of Jesus that he might be "born" in us anew and continue to abide with us in all the days to come. May the spirit of Christ be truly incarnated in us, so that our lives are a light to others as Jesus is the "everlasting Light" to us. **Amen.**