

## Christmas Eve: Calm and Bright

Luke 2: 1-20

There is something about Christmas Eve. It is hard to describe that "something" that many of us are feeling tonight and it is different, to be sure, for everyone. The older we are and the more memories we accumulate, the more complex the feeling becomes. Perhaps the tendency for reflection upon one's life and the presence or absence of loved ones on this night is why we love it so.

I know for me, thoughts about previous Christmas Eve services and Christmas day activities are especially filling my mind this year. Particularly, I am thinking of times spent with my mother who passed away just a couple of months ago. Remembering her at this time is sweet, warm, loving and painful all at the same time. I think you can all identify.

But tonight is more, much more, than family remembrances. On this night we have gathered to remember the promise of God—that God would be "Emmanuel," God-with-us forever more. And that promise was fulfilled in the birth of a boy to a carpenter and his wife who, because there was no room for them in the inn, had to use a cattle feed trough for his crib.

Our focus and decorations have been directed by the classic hymn, "Silent Night," which first made its debut on Christmas Eve, 1818 at the St. Nicholas chapel in the town of Oberndorf in Salzburg, Austria. The melody by composer Franz Gruber is instantly recognizable from the first few notes, and the original text by Joseph Mohr has been translated from the original German into over 140 languages. During the season of Advent we have spoken and looked at a verse of Silent Night each week. Those words challenged us to be changed and renewed as we gathered this night. Tonight, for the first time, as we light the candles at the end of the service, we will actually sing this beloved carol. During the weeks we have asked ourselves, "How can we be peacemakers in a world with so much dissention?" as we lit the first candle for Peace. Next we were reminded how God's Glory and light are always with us and so we should not fear but be filled with Joy, symbolized in the second candle we lit. We then jumped forward in our minds and gathered at the manger as we contemplated the incredible message of how much God loves us as seen in the birth of Jesus. Finally we were

challenged to ask ourselves where our allegiance really lies. Is Jesus our King? If so, we are reminded that God's love ultimately triumphs over evil and so we lit a candle for the hope that comes through the power of God's love.

Now we have come to the manger. It is a long ago story but it is also a story for us today. We are invited to place ourselves into the story. The "genius" of Luke's story, of course, is that he portrays the greatest event the world will ever know through the simple and everyday characters of a young mother, worried father and common shepherds. Luke wants, I think, to make sure we realize that the baby born in Bethlehem was just like us! If God can work in and through such ordinary people, we are left to wonder if perhaps God can also work in and through us.

And it is not simply history "in general" that God enters via this birth, it is our history and our very lives to which God is committed. The words the angels spoke to the shepherds so long ago are still pertinent for us. They said, "Your savior is born today." to use a modern translation. The angels wanted these shepherds to know that this divine moment in creation was all about meeting their needs, providing them with a savior and more! They, because they being the lowest of the low on the economic spectrum, would assume that when a savior came it would be for others, the good folk who went to the temple, not for people like them. No, they were told, "your savior" has been born. Christmas is the story of our salvation through Jesus. Do you hear the angels whispering to you this night, "I have good news for you. Your Savior is born!"? You should! This story of long ago is also about us, all of us gathered here. God came at Christmas for us, that we might have hope and courage amid the dark and dangerous times and places of our lives. This, in the end, is why we gather tonight. It is to remember and celebrate that as God entered into time and history so long ago, God also enters our lives even now.

Where do you need reminders that God is with you. Where do you need to let God's glory dawn on your dark places? Where do you need to hear "your savior has been born?"

I think of a story I heard a couple of years ago about a Christmas. She had lost her husband that year and her two children lived far across the country. She had some health problems of her own, making it impossible for her to travel this holiday season.

Her daughter had come for Thanksgiving but could not return for Christmas. Her son had used up all of his vacation time when his father died. They didn't want her to be alone at Christmas but there was nothing they could do. She was feeling down as she went to church the Sunday before Christmas. Just before the service, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around to see a young woman she didn't know. The woman was sitting with her husband and two children. The woman was a bit embarrassed as she mentioned how she had felt a nudge from God to reach out to the woman ahead of her in church. The woman was feeling lonely. She was away from family for the first time and was missing her mom and wished her children could be with their grandparents at Christmas. Would she be willing to come to their home for Christmas dinner and be an adoptive grandma? It was as if the Glory of God shown around them. She said yes. They became good friends, sitting together in church, she attending the kids programs at school and sharing meals back and forth. That Christmas nudge is how God, Emmanuel, reminded her she was not alone and the young family that God knew their loneliness too. Emmanuel, God is with you, this Holy Season.

Now you might be thinking, how can this promise be trusted in a world that is lonely and unforgiving? Herod's murderous response in Matthew to Jesus' birth may often seem more credible to us who have been hardened by harsh political realities, ancient and modern. After all, force triumphs not love. But the wonder of the Christmas Gospel is not mere sentiment. "Silent Night, Holy Night" is a testimony to a divine mercy ready to pay the price of rejection and death that leads us to life. In the end, Caesar and Herod became insignificant. They have bit parts in this drama and if it were not for their connection to Jesus, they would not be remembered, except by historians.

I am a historian and I think of other examples of how love ultimately triumphed over evil. Let me share one example. It is from our own history. I grew up in the age of the Civil Rights movement and watched the life and ultimately the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. play out on the nightly news that my father would watch as we ate dinner. I remember seeing Governor George Wallace of Alabama on the news. He was the premier segregationist of his time. He ran for president several times and was wildly popular and powerful. What chance did a Baptist preacher have against those kinds of forces? I recall my father often saying that hate never ultimately wins. "You just

watch,” he said. Almost 60 years later few children today have ever heard of George Wallace while we have a federal holiday named for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Towards the end of his life George Wallace admitted that his views were wrong. Recently George Wallace’s daughter has written a book talking candidly about her father and his racist views and how they poisoned his family and the country. This shows us the power of love. This is the hope of this season. Where do you need reminders of God with you banishing the darkness you are experiencing?

For me, as I said, this is a season of loss. For the first time in my life I have no parents to call to wish Merry Christmas. I am now the oldest generation for my family. Yet, instead of feeling sadness I feel much joy. Why, you may ask? Because I see how the faith and love of God has moved down through the generations. I learned some of what it meant to be a person of faith from my grandparents, and especially my parents. Tonight my children and grandchildren are all at worship, either here or in Maryland. That is five generations and I know it stretches, this thing called faith, even farther back. In my wife Jenny’s case the stream of faith, and Methodist pastors, goes back almost 200 years, close to the founding of our denomination in America. Seeing the faith move through the generations gives me great hope. Knowing how God’s love has transformed me and is transforming the generations behind me give me great hope. Christmas is not a story of just what God did once, but that our Savior was born. God cares about us, loves us, and brings light into the darkest moments of our lives. And ultimately we celebrate that love every time we are gracious to another, every time we are willing to forgive, and every time we offer a word of encouragement.

We are here because we believe love is the strongest force there is. After all, it is that love, sent from above, that we celebrate tonight. Through that love, I know my savior was born and through his love I will live eternally. As the writer of John says, God’s light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish the light. So no matter what I might be experiencing now or might experience in the days to come I know I walk in the light of the manger and nothing will overcome that light.

This gives me hope. This challenges me to love as a way to share this light with others. This is our faith.