

The Feast of the Nativity B - Christmas Eve - 24 December 2011

Isaiah 62:6-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

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We hear this night these familiar and beloved songs and carols. We see the beauty of these trees and decorations. We find ourselves surrounded with friends and family and with strangers who are our kin in the spirit. As our eyes and ears and hearts revel in the many blessings that define Christmas for us, there is, I think, one blessing in particular that deserves special attention.

It is the holy permission that is implicitly granted to us at this time of year to embrace that innocence that is within us, that simple joy, that quiet awe, that wonder that Christmastime is uniquely able to inspire. Author Laura Ingalls Wilder has written, 'Our hearts grow tender with childhood memories and love of kindred, and we are better throughout the year for having, in spirit, become a child again at Christmas-time.' There is a sweetness, an unadorned unadulterated joy that people either recall from their Christmases past or that people seek for their Christmases present and future; and Wilder's observation speaks to this.

We can refer to the holiday shopping rush, to the commercialization of this holy day of spiritual and religious meaning; it's probably impossible to avoid completely this curious blend of secular habit and religious practice. As someone has suggested the three best-known phrases that sum up Christmas are 'Peace on Earth,' 'Goodwill to Men,' and 'Batteries not Included.'

But even this curious, if forced, blend of cultures does continue precisely because people do refuse to surrender those aspects of Christmas that make it more valuable to our lives than the mere giving and receiving of gifts. So, good for people! Good for us! Someone has put it, "Christmas may be a day of feasting, or of prayer, but always it will be a day of remembrance, a day in which we think of everything that we have ever loved."

While we remember the gifts of our memories this year, and while we create this year new memories for years to come, and while we exchange gifts with family, friends, and strangers, in honor of the gift that God has given to us all, we do well to remember also that, at the time of his birth, consider the fact neither Jesus, nor Mary his mother, nor Joseph her husband, nor the shepherds who came to see the miracle, had any regular occasion such as this one that we now enjoy to recall together past seasons of joy and innocence.

These had then no special day as we do here to create together new memories of awe and wonder that they would pass along to family and friends. We may ask ourselves what it would be like for us to endure the year without the slightest hint of Christmas. We may wonder what life would be like without at least an annual reference to the virtues of kindness toward one another and charity toward people less fortunate than ourselves. And we would conclude, I suggest, that our lives would be less.

Even had we never heard of such a thing as Christmas, surely there is something within us, something within humankind in general, that searches for the ideal of the fellowship of people. We cannot know for certain, of course, but I think it is safe and faithful to assume that Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and others at the time of the birth of Jesus had hopes and dreams of much the same.

From their most ancient traditions, the best that the people of this time have are the promises of prophets that God will send them salvation. They have such words as we hear in the Reading from the prophet Isaiah this evening. 'A savior will come, his reward will be with him, his compensation will accompany him.' Just exactly what this might mean remains a mystery through the many generations between the day of the prophet and the time of the Christ child.

But even so, there is hope in the promises and predictions that someday, somehow, God would do something, God would send someone; and that then they would have the peace, the freedom, the security, the stability, that they have longed for, and that many of them have never, ever known. And even if the people cannot always have hope, even if they cannot always sustain their confidence, these words, these promises, show that God never loses hope for the future, God never loses confidence in the people.

Like many people now, perhaps like you or me at times in our own lives, Mary and Joseph in their day are subject to a social culture and a political system that seem to them to be largely beyond their control. At a time that is inconvenient, even dangerous, for Mary to make the journey, they are compelled to travel from home to a town far away. The town is far too small to accommodate the number of people driven there by political wisdom and imperial indifference.

And when Mary and Joseph are forced to take humiliating refuge among somebody's livestock, the contrast is complete between the imperial culture of conspicuous power and the humble way of God come among us. It is these and people like them, people with no home to go to, people forced to move about for the only shelter that they can find, who's last refuge in life may well be their hope in God.

It is people like these, people like the shepherds in the story, people doing any thankless dirty job that no one else will do, and doing it away somewhere where no one else has to notice either the labor or the laborer, it is people like Mary, like Joseph, like the shepherds, people like them in their day and in our own, who may be best equipped of all of us to see the signs of heaven's joy, to join in the songs of heaven's praise, when the hope of heaven and earth finally arrives.

Christmas is the celebration of God coming to us as one of us. More than this, though, it is a celebration of God choice to come to us as an infant, and as one born into the specific circumstance of

Jesus' birth. Christmas, then, is God's granting permission to us to remember and rediscover that unpretentious innocence that is our most natural and created way of being, and yet which we often dismiss and hide away for most of the rest of the year. Christmas is God's permission to us to remember and reclaim our wonder and our awe at things as simple as the sight of shining lights the sound of ringing bells, the aroma of holiday treats.

Christmas is God's permission to us to recall and resume our hope in things as profound as the embrace of family and friends and the capacity of ours and of every human heart for kindness and good will toward all. Someone named Francis C. Farley is said to have put it this way: "Instead of being a time of unusual behavior, Christmas is perhaps the only time in the year when people can obey their natural impulses and express their true sentiments without feeling self-conscious and, perhaps, foolish. "In short," Farley, says, "Christmas is about the only chance that people have to be themselves."

Look around you tonight; here in this place made holy by the presence of God and by our own. See the beauty of God's creation and humanity's decoration of it. Ponder in your heart the beauty of the people around you in the pleasure of their smile, in the twinkling of their eyes. Hear the notes of the music; listen to the lyrics of the songs. Join in humanity's praise for the gift of God come to us in person; and hear the sounds of God's own joy and revel with God in the memories of our Christmases past and present and future.

And so may God, who wonderfully created us, and more wonderfully restores the dignity of human nature, grant that we may share the divine life of the One who humbly shares in our humanity, Jesus the Christ, who lives and reigns with the Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.