

“O Holy Night”
Sermon for Christmas Eve
Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches
December 24, 2017 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Sermon Text: The Christmas Story as told by Luke 2:1-20

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness –
on them light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)

O holy night!

Mary and Joseph have arrived in Bethlehem to a swelling population as those descended from the house of David stream into the city to be registered. It is an occupied city. Extra Roman officials and troops are stationed there to assure a peaceful time in an overcrowded for now region. Tired, achingly tired from their journey, Mary and Joseph seek shelter. Urgency sets in as Mary’s body signals that the time has come for the baby she is carrying to be birthed. She slumps over, crying out with a first momentary spasm. Joseph hurries his search for a place for them to stay in a city where every room is already booked.

The angels are busy traveling the distance from heaven to earth. A brilliant light in the sky is playing a star role. A few men from the far distant East are atop wearied camels plodding steadily towards the beam of light cast by that star whenever night falls. Elsewhere in this small country, Herod, king of the Jews, but a puppet of Roman masters, is feasting in his palace, but soon indigestion and sleepless nights filled with disturbing dreams and visions will rob him of any peace. As night falls, the holy-to-be family, with no other place available to them, is settled in a secluded shelter, a stable area with an earthen floor hard packed by the animals who have also sheltered there.

The world does not know it at the time, but something is about to happen that will impact it for at least the next two thousand years.

Hush, hush. In the approaching silent night something is about to happen.

No one was really waiting for it to happen – just then – over two thousand years ago – the birth cry of a messiah – not on that night, not in that place – not in or around a little town named Bethlehem, although if they had remembered long ago prophecies Bethlehem had been mentioned. The prophecies in ancient scriptures about a messiah to be born in Bethlehem were almost forgotten, hidden in the mists of time.

Hush, hush. But no one was waiting for something special to happen in that little town centuries after the old prophecies. No one – expect an expectant Mary, a watchful Joseph, and a beam of starlight hovering over where Mary lay giving birth. But maybe there was another waiting: A heavenly Father.

Was not God hovering around, listening, waiting for that first cry with an overflowing heart and with great expectations of this part of GODS-SELF becoming an amazing gift to the world, doing marvelous things? Granted it is hard to imagine God like the fathers we know today, hovering around a hospital birthing room, feeling somewhat helpless in the face of the mystery of birth unfolding before their very eyes. Even though they certainly had a part of play in the creation of about to be new life, most fathers are in awe of what is happening. The mother obviously is busy, but the father – he must simply wait – perhaps breathe in rhythm with the birthing mother. Be encouraging (push, push) like he learned in the classes they took together. A father might be told by medical staff to stay a bit out of the way, try not to faint while watching the messiness of actual birth. But he may also be praying his heart out that all will be well, because sometimes it does not – go well that is.

Like our heavenly Father, don't we have hopeful hearts as we too hover around on Christmas Eve, as we do every year, waiting for the birthing of new life? We feel excitement, joy. We too sing our hearts out (almost) like the angels. In awe we draw closer, like the shepherds, to gaze upon what we have been told will offer a miracle of life and to give praise to God for what is happening as new life emerges, as hope is birthed, yet again. And we too, as we come nearer, become bathed in star shine.

I was in Bethlehem in May of 2014. It is ringed by a massive wall, keeping some people in and others out, check points and armed soldiers with Uzies spotted along

the wall. An ancient symbol of peace – a dove – painted on the side of a building wears a flak jacket and a bull's eye sniper's "x" over its heart. The people in that land are, in a way, once again enslaved. Not slaves to an external force such as ancient Rome that had conquered their ancestors, but by powerful internal forces that can also conquer people: fear, anger, distrust. Piercing the night outside our hotel the one night we were there were not the sounds of a baby's cry, but the sounds of gunfire. It was impossible to imagine the birth of love and of new life in that place.

I checked the weather today for Bethlehem as Christmas Eve turned (ahead of our hemisphere) to Christmas Day. The temperature there is ranging between 56 degrees and 38 degrees – not cold enough to snow. But there's a 70% chance of rain and the wind is blowing at a strong, projected 20 miles per hour. Tensions are blowing strong, too. According to some news reports, although this is a peak time of year for tourists from around the world to visit Bethlehem as the birthplace of Christ, there are plenty of vacant rooms available since profound unrest has characterized that city over the past several months. Pictures of Bethlehem recently include armored vehicles, Israeli soldiers dispersing tear gas, Palestinian protestors (both Christian and Muslim), some wearing Santa Claus suits, shouting threats and throwing rocks, both sides carrying guns. Violence, fear, distrust, anger prevail. That area of the world is not alone in what has been happening. Over the last few years and particularly during this year news from all around the world, from within our country and even in our own communities, groove images of violence, sparked by fear, distrust, anger.

Yet, here we are again on a Christmas Eve with hope and even expectancy that maybe something new can be birthed into our waiting world – a world desperate to experience hope for love not hate and fear to prevail, for peace to enter in and disperse what seems like so much darkness trying to overcome the light and control our world.

Just outside the wall around parts of Bethlehem today is a place called the Field of the Shepherds. The day after the night of gunfire in May 2014 our little group went there. It is a quiet place, ringed by grassy hills, not walls. A simple, light filled basilica stands on the hill overlooking the ancient city. In the rocky hillside just below is a rock hewn cave. They say that shepherds long ago would use such caves to give overnight shelter for their flocks. I stood in the center of that domed

space and felt the holy – a profound sense that it was filled with a holy peace. Here, more than any other spot which local tourism promoted as the place of Christ’s birth, I felt a holy presence as if this, or a place like it, was where the holy child had been, his birth sheltered, at least for one holy night, from the outside world. I seemed to hear, very faintly, something within the silence. Was that music in the fields nearby, calling others to come and see what was born in that space? In the silence, with the soft afternoon light turning into evening and filtering through spaces in the rocks, I felt enveloped by something immensely hope filled and joy full. I just stood there, absorbing the essence of that place, feeling peace before leaving that trouble filled land.

We need silent, hope filled spaces in which to shelter. Where we can feel the birth of hope and joy – no matter what is happening in the world “outside” – the world around us. In nights such as this Christmas Eve night, when we gather, when we tell the old, old stories, when we try together to sing like the angels, when we open our minds, hearts and souls to the possibility of new life entering and filling us, I believe our heavenly Father is hovering around us, waiting and hoping for the birthing of new life for us as we listen for the sounds of the birth of our Savior bringing peace into our hearts and into the heart of the world.

Hush, hush. In this silent night, during this holy night, may we, you and I, each feel God hovering around us and then enveloping us in love – holding us as if we too are newly born. Hush, hush, let it happen – just let it be. On this night, this holy night, may we be born again.