

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, December 25, 2011.

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

We are a maritime nation. Part of the fascination the sea holds for us is its mystery and its infinite danger. The sea today is as dangerous as when Paul sailed the eastern Mediterranean. In the lifetime of some of us here, more Allied ships were lost to the typhoon at Okinawa than to the Japanese. A submarine skipper I knew and served with had a plaque on his stateroom wall, "O Lord thy sea is so great and my boat is so small." That Jesus could control the sea and bid its tumults cease, in the words of the hymn, was nothing short of divinely miraculous, if that isn't redundant. No wonder his contemporaries and followers asked themselves "Who is this Jesus of Nazareth, that even the winds and the seas obey him?" Peter and the other fishermen in the boat answered that question, without hesitation and from their hearts, for them and for us today, for all time to come, "truly you are the Son of God."

We gather to celebrate now the birth today of that Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, in Bethlehem. Some of you may have been to the very spot, as I have. Envisioning that birthplace, in Manger Square as it was 2000 years ago is no easier than envisioning Time Square in New York as pastoral and rural, but the spot is there. Philips Brooks, the Bishop of Massachusetts 140 odd years ago, put it best I think in his wonderful hymn O Little Town of Bethlehem: The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. And Christmas is that place where our hopes and our fears intersect, where our doubts mesh with our faith.

There is a reason though for the maritime imagery today, and to help us in our celebration of Christmas I want to share with you again a lovely and challenging prayer, written over 400 years ago by an unlikely hand. We used it here at St. Luke's during our every member canvass this fall:

Disturb us, O Lord, when we are too well-pleased with ourselves; when our dreams come true because we dream too small; when we arrive safely because we sail too close to the shore. Disturb us O Lord, when the abundance of the things we possess causes us to thirst for the water of life. Stir us, Lord, to dare more boldly; to venture on wider seas where storms will reveal your mastery, and where in losing sight of land we shall find the stars. Push back, we pray, the horizons of our hope and lead us into the future with strength, courage, hope, and love. Amen.

Sir Francis Drake, Elizabeth's Vice Admiral, the same Drake who finished his game of bowls at Plymouth before sailing against the Spanish Armada, knew they were coming, and he wrote that prayer to encourage those Elizabethan sailors and marines who manned his ships. We could do far worse than make it our own prayer this Christmas and for the rest of our lives.

Christmas is so many things, so many emotions. It can be a tough time. Homicide, suicide, bank robberies, and domestic violence are all up at Christmas. Happiness is at a high, but so is loneliness. Christmas is when we

all want to go home, if only in our dreams. Home is where they have to let us in, but again, maybe only in our dreams.

Christmas is family. Many of us are blessed in having loving families. Not all are so fortunate. For some, family may rekindle memory of abuse-physical, emotional, sexual, all of the above. Families don't always stay together either. I know men in prison who pray daily for their children, and have no idea where they are. The mortality rate for marriage and family togetherness when either Mom or Dad is in prison is very high. They still laugh at what another priest asked me once, "Will you be with friends and loved ones this Christmas, or relatives?" To some though it is pretty black humor.

Christmas is a time for memories, of when we were young and innocent, of little babies, and much older grandparents. Maybe most of all, there are memories of those no longer with us, or maybe those half a country or half a world away. Christmas is remembering stories told by our grandparents of Christmas more than a hundred years ago, and the stories their grandparents told. Christmas is also anticipating the birth of babies not yet born.

Christmas is supposed to be a time of peace, but the world as usual is very much on red alert this year. It was on Christmas night that George Washington and his army crossed the Delaware River to attack the British at Trenton. It was on Christmas that Wake Island fell, but it was also at Christmas in 1915 that British and German troops in France declared their own truce, beginning with the singing of Stille Nacht, Silent Night, and culminating in a holiday atmosphere of love in no man's land between the

trenches along the Somme, until the senior officers in the rear put a stop to such foolishness. War and peace, hopes and fears, and all at Christmas.

Christmas is food, lots of it. Turkey, goose, ham, stuffing, oysters, eggnog, ambrosia, soup at a Salvation Army mission, cheap wine under a bridge, and Spam.

Christmas is pregnant with hope and possibility. In prison at Christmas in 1993 I was talking about how in a world where the wolf can lie down with the lamb, as Isaiah foretold, and where God can become man, the word become flesh, well anything is possible, isn't it? One of the guys piped up and said, "I guess so. Duke is in a bowl game this year." Just another example of unexpected divine intervention, one might argue. And of course Christmas is also the spiritual life giving food we share at the altar here-bread, wine and water. The Thanksgiving meal we celebrate together, in thanks for the gifts of Christ and grace, and all that they mean.

My friend Barbara Brown Taylor, as good a preacher as I know, has written of Christmas where she lives, in a small town in north Georgia, of battered, run-down trailers decorated with dozens of yard of colored lights, and a plastic Santa Claus with reindeer on the roof next to the satellite dish, and of inmates from the local jail putting up the town's decorations. She likens the kingdom of heaven to that old trailer made beautiful for a child's eyes, and a bunch of inmates set free to wreath the town square for a party. There is a holy spark that smolders underneath all the gratuitous tinsel. Barbara goes on to say that:

There are all kinds of things wrong with the way we celebrate Christmas. We eat too much, we spend too much, we sentimentalize too much, we worry too much. Those excesses cannot douse the holy instincts that underlie them. We really are hungry. We really do want to give and receive. We really do want to feel deeply, live peaceably, sleep soundly and rise renewed. As the season moves toward its apogee, those of us who believe we know where those instincts lead may do more good by wading into the culture than by separating ourselves from it. God is in the midst of it, after all, still hunting new flesh in which to be born.

Amen.

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