

# Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

## Pastor's Blog: December 15, 2011

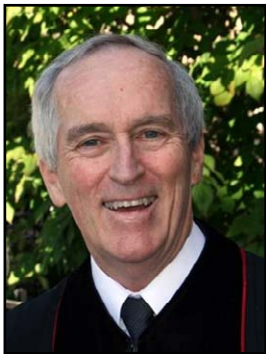
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### Reflections on “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

By the Rev. Charles Grant

*O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*



As we approach the end of the Advent season, most of us can't wait to sing again the beloved carols celebrating the birth of Jesus. The carols are not scripture, even if we know them better than scriptures. The theology of the carols might not be exactly right, and some of the carols take more than a little poetic license with the gospel accounts. But most of our beloved carols have got the sentiment and feel of Christmas just about right.

“**O Little Town of Bethlehem**” is one of my favorite carols. The text was written here in Philadelphia by the Rev. Phillips Brooks in 1868. Brooks was the rector of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church on Rittenhouse Square, and was widely known in his day as the “prince of the pulpit.” The inspiration for the writing of the text was Brooks’ Christmas Eve visit to Bethlehem in 1865. The tune most often associated with the carol is St. Louis, composed by the Holy Trinity Church organist Lewis Henry Redner – the night before its “premier” at a church Sunday School pageant. In addition to writing a beloved melody, Redner also left a very tangible legacy—he established an endowment fund which still supports the ministry of Trinity Church.

Placing Jesus’ birth in **Bethlehem** imbues the story with symbolic meaning. “Bethlehem” in Hebrew literally means “house of bread”, suggesting a town of fullness and abundant prosperity. Bethlehem’s history, however, has been anything but fullness and prosperity. Bethlehem then as now was an insignificant little suburb of the mighty city of Jerusalem, a city the ancients called the “navel of the universe”. Bethlehem was the ancestral home of Naomi and her sons – one of whom married Ruth. That sounds impressive, until you remember that Naomi left Bethlehem because of the years of famine that afflicted it. Eventually Naomi and Ruth returned to her home in Bethlehem. Among Ruth’s descendents was the mighty king David, and through David’s lineage, Jesus. Bethlehem, the “house of Bread”, has a rich history.

Like Phillips Brooks, I made a pilgrimage to Bethlehem, visiting there as a college student in 1971. The small town of Bethlehem has but one attraction: manger square and the 4th century church of the Nativity, built over the traditional spot of Jesus’ birth.

While the basis of that tradition is suspect, to say the least, there is no denying that Christian pilgrims have prayed in that church for 1600 years – and there is something very holy about that. In front of the ancient and simple stone church of the Nativity is the expanse of Manger square, surrounded by shops catering to the tourists who flock there year round, and



Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem

especially on Christmas Eve. At least that's the way it USED to be, when Phillips Brooks and I went there. But no more. For in recent years, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has all but eliminated the tourist trade in Bethlehem. As it was in Naomi and Ruth's day, there is an economic famine in the city of the house of bread: Bethlehem is a West Bank Palestinian and Arab Christian town surrounded by Israel.

***O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!*** Bethlehem is a kind of everyman-like "every city".

Bethlehem today - as in the days of Jesus - symbolizes the persistence of hope in the midst of human brokenness.

Our world is filled with wars and the rumors of wars. Our cities struggle and stumble under the burden of poverty and decay. The darkness and despair of this world cannot extinguish Bethlehem's star of hope: in Bethlehem's ***dark streets shineth the everlasting light.*** God is announcing the coming of a new day!

***Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.*** All who despair are of the house and lineage of David. All who live between faith and doubt, hope and fear. All who ache for deeper fulfillment in life. All who yearn for the meaning and truth of life. That is to say, *all of us are of the lineage of David.* All of us are brothers and sisters of the boy born of poor parents who laid their baby in a manger, for there was no room for them in the inn.



Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem

A major theme running through all of the Christmas stories is the incarnation of God in the man Jesus, that God was fully and completely present in and with Jesus. But the power of the Christmas stories and Christmas carols, I think, is less in what they say about *God* and *Jesus* and more in what they say about *God* and *us*. For what the Christmas carols and the birth narrative of Luke both affirm is that in Jesus, *God is with us*. God is with us, sharing our pain, living with our fears and doubts, enduring our sorrows, and joining in our joys. God is with us from birth to death. God is with us, no matter what our background, no matter where we were born, no matter who we are. God is with us, from the lowliest shepherd to the most exalted ruler. God is with us, loving us, leading us, teaching us, saving us. What greater Christmas gift is there than that!

## Prayer

*O holy Child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in - be born to us today  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell  
O come to us, abide with us - our Lord Emmanuel.*