

O Little Town Of Bethlehem

Fourth in Advent Sermon Series
The Radical Hope of the Carols

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Isaiah 7:10-16

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

“Tis the season when people enjoy the re-telling of classic Christmas stories. In this church Advent actually begins with the showing of *The Polar Express* for our young children. At home, some of us watch *It’s a Wonderful Life*; we hum with the Whos Down in Whoville during *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and we enjoy Linus narrating *A Charlie Brown Christmas* for the umpteenth time. We pull off the bookshelves the Christmas picture books that we’ve read to our children and grandchildren, and re-visit old classic stories like O’Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi,” one of my personal favorites, Truman Capote’s “A Christmas Memory,” and of course, Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.”

Given the time in which we find ourselves this week it was another Dickens classic that came to mind for me. On the one hand, the news is pretty good about the economy and employment numbers are improved. On the other hand, our country continues to be bitterly divided by politics – so evident in this historic week of the impeachment; while we still struggle to address serious social issues like the growing disparity between the wealthy and poor; the rapidly escalating suicide rates; a kind of internet warfare and cyber terrorism that feels both fairly new and incredibly frightening.

The good and bad news together made me recall that classic opening paragraph of Dickens’ *The Tale of Two Cities*, set in London and Paris on the eve of the French Revolution. Some of you remember how Dickens’ most famous historical novel begins: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of Light; it was the season of Darkness. It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us; we had nothing before us...” Those old words seem hauntingly current, don’t they?

That is what makes a story a classic – one that is told in a particular moment in time, which conveys a truth – that transcends time. If we just reverse the order of Dickens’ reflection: it was the worst of times; it was the best of times; it was the winter of despair, it was the spring of hope; we realize that.

So begins the most classic Christmas story of all, when at a particular moment in time, something happened that transcends all time. *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria...* and back in the gospel's first chapter we are also told it was: *In the days of King Herod of Judea.*

Now we do not cast Herod, or Caesar Augustus or Quirinius in our Christmas pageants – but there they are – the world's political power players in the opening act of the birth of Jesus. They remind us – these three, that the birth of Jesus happened in the worst of times. Herod was a puppet king for Rome. He had a huge ego and a short temper. Most of what he accomplished, he did by bribery, and he murdered anyone who stood in his way. He killed one of his wives and two of his sons. There was a saying at the time that it was better to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons. He was a cruel and terrifying figure – Herod who stands out on the opening page of Luke's gospel.

Then there is Caesar Augustus who ruled like he was a god *and* probably thought he was a god. His statue was in every town of any size. His troops carried his image with them in bronze and marble figures as they expanded his empire. His face was on every coin. He expected to be worshipped.

Quirinius is not as well established historically. We only know that he was part of the Roman hierarchy, a military governor, and therefore represented all that was hated by the Jews living under the foreign occupation of their land. The census decreed by Caesar Augustus and implemented by governors like Quirinius was not just a head count. It was a means by which the emperor identified taxable subjects and decided who could be conscripted into the army. *In the days of Herod the King... during the reign of Caesar Augustus... when Quirinius was governor of Syria...* is Luke's way of saying: "It was the worst of times, but God made it the best of times!" These historic figures are intended to locate the birth of Jesus in that particular time, and the place of his birth further

emphasizes the remarkably hopeful thing God is doing in their world of fear.

One biblical scholar notes that Bethlehem is a place of no account. Nine miles from Jerusalem, it is out of the way. Nine miles from Jerusalem means it is nine miles from importance, nine miles from power, deemed “little among the clans of Judah.” The scholar writes: “This little town of Bethlehem is replicated in many out-of-the-way places where nobody important ever goes, where there are no possibilities or hopes but only subsistence, vigilance and fear.”

Writer and poet Madeleine L’Engle said it this way:

*That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome.
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn –
Yet here did the Savior make his home.*

*When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by greed and pride the sky is torn –
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.¹*

In the midst of the most fearful days of our lives, God gives us a Festival of Hope. Life was difficult beyond belief in those days. And life may be agonizingly difficult in our day. For some of us the difficulty comes from within: Fear about a diagnosis; fear about what tomorrow may bring; fear about the things that keep us awake at night. For others of us, our fears arise from external circumstances: Fears our country is coming unglued, fears the values we once shared no longer work for the common good; fears about the environment that we are already facing serious questions about the viability of our planet; fears that the rich will keep getting richer and the poor will get poorer, a reality that, historically speaking, often results in revolution; fears that our differences will continue to divide us.

¹ Madeleine L’Engle, “The Risk of Birth.”

By naming Herod and Augustus and Quirinius, the gospel wants us to remember that in the worst possible circumstances, into a world ruled by tyrants who exercised their power by spreading fear, God enters in. God's love takes on human flesh, and a *wondrous gift is given*: the wonder of the Christ child, the miracle of new possibility, the commencement of a future redeemed. Little Bethlehem, nine miles from the fearful center of human power, becomes the matrix of God's newness.

Phillips Brooks described Luke's telling of the birth of Jesus, this story of paradox and contrasts in one of our most treasured Christmas carols, writing *the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*" Phillips Brooks was only the second pastor called to serve Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Philadelphia on Rittenhouse Square. The church has always been connected to the heart of the city, founded when urban development was moving westward from the Delaware River. A group of prosperous merchants founded the new Episcopal parish on one of the four squares laid out in William Penn's original plan.

At the time, there was controversy in the larger Episcopal denomination about the nature and formality of worship, and the founders of Holy Trinity wanted to assure a neighborhood place for a "low church" with simpler liturgies, emphasizing preaching and teaching as opposed to the "high church" emphasis on the sacraments and a more formal liturgy.

When Holy Trinity's founding pastor made a name for himself in the "Low Church" movement and was called to New York, he was succeeded by Phillips Brooks, one of the great Christian orators of his time. Brooks' straightforward Christian message, his powerful Sunday preaching and midweek evening lectures attracted many of Philadelphia's most socially prominent citizens, as well as congregants from all socio-economic classes.

About the same time Charles Dickens was writing *A Tale of Two Cities* in the mid-nineteenth century, Brooks entered the fray of the political and social turmoil in our country surrounding

slavery and the Civil War. His eloquent sermons and lectures against slavery sparked the resignations of several prominent members of his congregation. When the funeral train carrying the body of Abraham Lincoln made its way from Washington to Springfield, Illinois, one of the stops for Lincoln to lie in state was Independence Hall. A not-yet-thirty-year-old preacher, Phillips Brooks was invited to preach for the occasion.

His rousing and powerful eulogy to Abraham Lincoln in 1865, won him national attention as one of the leading Christian intellectuals of the day, and a prophetic voice for social justice. At the end of the war he took a sabbatical year, and traveled to Europe and the Holy Land. A couple of years later, inspired by the memory of his visit to Bethlehem, in 1868 he wrote a poem for the children's Sunday School at Holy Trinity church. He asked the church organist to set it to music and "O Little Town of Bethlehem" soon took its place as one of the most beloved Christmas carols.

A year after that, in 1869 Brooks was called to be the rector of Boston's historic Trinity Church and later became Bishop of Massachusetts. As Bishop he began a sweet correspondence with an eleven-year-old named Helen Keller. Into the isolation she lived as both blind and deaf, he listened to her penetrating questions about God and offered kind words about the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ, who Brooks said had entered her heart.

Long after moving to Boston, Phillips Brooks remained beloved by Philadelphia's Holy Trinity parish. Two years after his death in 1893, they dedicated the church's ornately carved pulpit in his memory. The inscription around the base of it reads, "To the Glory of God and in Loving Memory of Phillips Brooks. He being dead speaketh still." ²

He speaketh still – indeed – for every time we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," we give voice to what has become his most famous sermon on the gospel of Luke's birth narrative of Jesus.

² Library.brown.edu

It is his eloquent insight – based on his deep understanding of Holy Scripture, that in Jesus Christ the worst of times are redeemed by God’s love and grace; and the fears of all the years are met by the hope that in the person of Jesus – God is doing a new thing.

Yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

AMEN.

1) Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance: Devotions for Advent*, p. 89.