

Christmas Sermon 2019
Saint Mark's Episcopal Church
Charleston, South Carolina
The Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

“O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that light on earth, may always hear your word of Hope and live in the Love of your Son Jesus Christ.” Amen

There is a holiday song that I love by country musician, Alan Jackson, called: “Let it be Christmas.” The lyrics go like this:

“Let it be Christmas everywhere
Let heavenly music fill the air
Let every heart sing let every bell ring
The story of hope and joy and peace
And let it be Christmas everywhere
Let heavenly music fill the air
Let anger and fear and hate disappear
Let there be love that lasts through the year
And let it be Christmas
Christmas everywhere...”

Wow, do I certainly need the peace, hope, and love of Christmas this year. What about you? What about our nation? What about this world? Eight centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed: “For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian...For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9) Each year on Christmas Eve, we hear these powerful words of Isaiah because hundreds of years before the birth of God’s son he foretold it happening. Isaiah’s calling as a prophet was primarily to the nation of Judah and to Jerusalem, urging the people to turn from their sinful ways and return to God. And yet, in his prophetic messages to them, he also foretold the coming of the Messiah and the salvation of the Lord—what we here tonight at Saint Mark’s have gathered to celebrate on this wonderful Christmas Eve.

Every Christmas I really miss my mother, and now my father as well. I also miss a very dear friend who so loved Christmas. Who are the people that you are missing this Christmas Eve? What memories of Christmas’ past seem like they were just yesterday for you? I grew up in a two-bedroom house, that was originally

built as a summer cottage on Long Island, that was less than 900 square feet, but somehow my mother was still able to fill our home with Christmas. For as long as I can remember, I have been in love with everything about Christmas. As a little boy, my mother would put me to bed on Christmas Eve in my parent's bed, and then later when I was fast asleep move me to mine. You see, my little bedroom had a clear view of the Christmas tree in the living room where Santa Claus would be placing the toys and presents. And, I knew for sure that the faster I fell asleep, the quicker that Santa would arrive; and, maybe because of my incredible cooperation would leave an extra toy or two.

No matter where you find yourself emotionally this Christmas, remember that you are not alone and there is so much hope. The amazing promise of Christmas, the profound promise of the Incarnation—God's coming into the world as the infant Son of Mary and Joseph—is that the heaviness of your burdens and that which oppresses you has indeed been lifted off of your shoulders and lightened because of the birth of the baby Jesus on this night in Bethlehem. We just heard Luke's story, "While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And 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.”
(Luke 2)

Listening to the story of Jesus’ birth never does get old. There is something each Christmas in hearing this beautiful and familiar narrative that brings us to a deep peace in our hearts. Our daily lives personally, within this nation, and in this world can at times be stressful and burdened; and sometimes even, we may live in fear of something. This is all part of the human condition, a same condition that existed more than 2000 years ago when Mary gave birth to Jesus, and along with her husband Joseph attended in that holy manger to the Christ-Child. I am pretty sure as well that those shepherds watching and protecting their sheep that first Christmas night were experiencing some of those same emotions. And yet, suddenly an angel appears to them with the words: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord...And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors’” (Luke 2)

The former Anglican Bishop of Durham, England, Dr. NT Wright preached these words one Christmas Eve: “The whole point of Christmas is that in Jesus, born in Bethlehem, heaven and earth have come together, so that giving glory to God in the highest heaven is directly, one might say umbilically, linked to working for peace and justice here on earth. And it’s time to start all over again as Christmas people, to think what that might look like if this Jesus is really Lord of the world, and if we who worship him are to work for his kingdom here and now...”

So tonight, on this Christmas Eve 2019, I pray that no matter what you may be presently going through or feeling, or who you may be missing, that you may know once again of the peace, hope, and love of the Christ-Child. Let Jesus be born again in your heart. And may this rebirth be as well a time that you and I commit to our work for his kingdom here and now, because as a Christmas people we know that Jesus really is the Lord of the world.

A Merry and Blessed Christmas to you and your loved ones!
Amen.