

Sermon for Trinity Church Christmas Eve, 2023

"...the angel said to them, "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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 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!"

These lovely words from the Gospel of Luke embrace us with the warmth of the familiar. Hear just a few of these words spoken and you know that one of the favorite seasons of the year, Christmas has arrived. Comfort, warmth, security—all these feelings come to the surface in our longing. But behind these words, hidden behind modern sentiments, a great battle is forming. Armies of darkness and light gather at the bidding of contesting emperors. One emperor, Caesar Augustus decrees the further expansion of the Roman Empire by means of a census. Count the soldiers for war and the money for battle. What can follow from that effort but more violence from that devouring empire? But the other king, the child Messiah, rather than gathering the people for war, gathers them for love and for peace.

Tonight, we sang one of almost everyone's favorite Christmas hymns, O Little Town of Bethlehem. The hymn's author's name, Phillips Brooks, has often been forgotten over the past few decades but not his hymn. Believe me, if you had met Brooks in his day, you would not have forgotten him; he was handsome, brilliantly well spoken, standing six feet three and weighing nearly three hundred pounds. When he left Harvard and then Virginia Episcopal Seminary, his sermons

were much in demand. Brooks' preaching filled first the pews of two churches in Philadelphia. A few years later, he was called to Trinity, Boston, then the cardinal parish of that time for the Episcopal Church. Later, he was made bishop of Massachusetts.

Brooks was both a passionate and kind preacher—sympathetic with the concerns of his congregation. But like so many preachers of his kind, he was emotionally vulnerable, and while it was hidden, often sad. It was because of that vulnerability that the hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem came to be written. Brooks had lived through the assassination of Lincoln and finally the horrors of the Civil War. He was nearly broken in spirit and so his church sent him on sabbatical, part of which he spent in Bethlehem at Christmas.

During that visit to Bethlehem, Brooks by all accounts finally found the peace that he had been looking for. Once sad and shattered, Brooks found in that Christmas evening worship a peace that had been eluding him, at least until he arrived in Bethlehem. Brooks returned home restored and some three years later, wrote the words of the hymn to share his peace.

The original hymn was longer and in one verse, spoke especially to the needs of children and their profound need for peace: the verse, now absent from most hymnals, read: "Where children pure and happy Pray to the blessed Child, Where misery cries out to thee, Son of the undefiled; Where charity stands watching And faith holds wide the door, The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, And Christmas comes once more."

I love that line "Where charity stands watching and faith holds wide the door, The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, And Christmas comes once more." Brooks has captured in that verse the substance of a kind of Christmas that

cannot be captured by the sentimental. Instead, Brooks offers what the Messiah brings again and again to the world—the promise of peace.

You've heard me say before that the *Gospel of Luke* presents the world in a way that we humans often take to be upside down. Where Empires offer a power won by armies, economies won by competition, the *Gospel of Luke* offers the exact opposite. We're not going to find our savior in the *Gospel of Luke*, clad in the robes of empire, a golden royal crown on his head, a sword in his hand, but instead clothed in bands of cloth and lying for warmth in a manger. What kind of King can this be, this infant Messiah, this Son of David? This is the King whose proclamation of light and peace still embraces us long after the promises of Caesar have disappeared.

My dear friends, it's Christmas Eve and for this night, we can joyfully say that the Lord, our Messiah, has given us the gift of a world turned right-side up. For as Brooks wrote so many years ago in Christmas hope:

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim thy holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And peace to men on earth

God bless all of you this Christmas and may the newborn King fill you with hope and peace. Amen.