

The celebration of Christ's Nativity, December 24-25 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton.  
Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

We sang great carols tonight, huh?! So familiar. Of course, they're so familiar in part because we've been hearing them for months, along with seeing all the Christmas decorations, in all malls and in all the stores - sometimes the carols are in direct competition with each other (which is very hard to overcome!), in all the elevators - in fact, pretty much everywhere....except, of course, here in church - until now, of course! There's clearly been an unspoken announcement that's echoed subliminally in our ears for all that time: "We interrupt the Christmas story for this commercial message!" At some point, the commercial message can become the Christmas message - if we let it. That shouldn't surprise us - there are some highly paid professionals employed to take over the message. The Advent theme, is - surprisingly - still relevant, therefore: be ALERT!!

All of this over-exposure easily leads to feeling jaded, even cynical, when this moment finally comes. That's a challenge for me, and it's a challenge for you - for all of us who call ourselves Christians. How do we allow the real story, the powerful, transformative story to find its way through all the clutter?

There are other challenges, too. Christmas is - along with Thanksgiving - frequently lauded as a family time - and so it is! But that can be a mixed blessing! Along with the genuine celebrations there can be moments when the realities of many families manage to break into the joy. How long before Uncle Joe's extreme political views start to poison the atmosphere? Or Brother Steve's whining goes beyond mere irritation? Or Sister Jane's drinking crosses a line?

Who'd have thought that this evening could be so complex?!!

What about those carols?!! Surely they're safe?!! Let's go back to them! In 1865 an Episcopal priest named Phillips Brooks - later Bishop of Massachusetts - visit to the small, rural village of Bethlehem - the real one, in the Holy Land. It's not hard to figure out why: after all the death and destruction in the Civil War - including (at Antietam) the bloodiest day in American history - he surely wanted to find some peace. He wrote a poem after that visit. Three years later he turned it into a Christmas carol for his church's Sunday school in Boston. You all know it; it's opening line is this: "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie...." Reading that carol in light of both his Civil War experience and the story of Jesus' birth is illuminating.

He understood the violence of Jesus' time because of the violent time he lived in. And even back then he also heard the intrusive commercialism. In this commercial, painfully loud season, when getting a very expensive new car is The Thing that's claimed to bring out the inner child in you, and when all your problems can apparently be solved if you just buy whatever it is that's being advertised, it's truer than ever that, as Brooks wrote, "No ear may hear his (Jesus') coming." Jesus gets drowned out !

That violence also drowned out Jesus, in Brooks view - as it does - can do - today. In this world

where the number of refugees from war has skyrocketed, where tens of millions are about to lose their healthcare as their taxes go up, and where families just like the Holy Family are caught in the poverty trap, or in a war zone, or under the jackboot of authoritarian government— in this sort of world Brooks words are right on: we are all living in a “*world of sin.*”

Christmas’ good news is this: our faith tells us that God is present – especially present – in all of these moments, in all of these challenges; and our faith tells us that God is not simply present – like an occasionally used hat-rack – but that God also actively journeys with us through these moments, through these challenges: through all the rank commercialism, all the difficult family dynamics, all the sorrows and tragedy, all the human pain and struggle. Yes “*in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;*” yes! *the hopes and fears of all [our] years are met in thee tonight.*”

In all of our lives’ dark, silent, forboding streets, the everlasting light shines for us, leads us through all the valleys of shadow, invites us to join the pilgrim’s journey into the heart of God.

That choice to join the pilgrimage, to make the journey together, is a choice we have to make. Brooks wrote that having an open and humble perspective toward God **is** the open door through which “*Christ [will] enter in.*” Is your heart’s door closed? Let this story open it, just a crack; let the light shine in! What you’ll find is that this Christmas story isn’t an end in itself, a terminus moment; rather it’s the start of something, a launch pad moment.

So if you really want to know what Christmas is about you’ll never get the answer if you don’t join the journey.

Wow! There’s a lot here to be serious about! If you promise to keep on journeying, then I say that it’s also okay to be sentimental! Who could not be touched by the birth of a child – something that carries the bigger message of hope, and possibility, and new life, and transformation – and, of course, challenge?! It’s okay to be sentimental.

And it’s okay to think and feel a sense of relief and safety tonight. Most of us – all of us here? – are not as badly off as Joseph and Mary: we have roofs over our heads to go to after this service; We’re not likely to be sleeping in a cold and drafty shed tonight; we’re not living in shelters, poor and homeless; we’re not hiding in a basement with bombs exploding overhead. We have much to be thankful for. So be thankful! Enjoy the moment! Celebrate!

At the heart of the Christian message, though, is this reminder: God’s engagement with us is this – is about sentimentality, and relief, and thanksgiving and celebration....and more. All of it loses its meaning if we get bogged down by it, if those very wonderful things become ends in themselves, if we stop there and go no further. So don’t see this moment as isolated from the rest of the year and the rest of your lives, in all of their richness and challenge: don’t be immobilized be energized.

One of us here (Dennis McManis) wrote me a note earlier in this month reflecting on what his barber in New Orleans said to him about the lack of local initiative to try and fix the many

problems they were experiencing during the months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the region. The barber said: *“The one thing Jesus DID NOT say was ‘Don’t do anything until I return!’”*

The one thing Christmas does not say is “now that the baby’s born all is forever right with the world - go home and celebrate because you’ll never be sad, or lonely, or angry, or lost, or frightened again.” What the Christmas story says this: whenever you feel sad, or lonely, or angry, or lost, or frightened, God in Jesus is right there with you, the light that shines in the darkness so brightly that ultimately no darkness can ever finally overcome it.

Yes, in all of our lives’ dark, silent, forboding streets, the everlasting light shines for us, leads us through all the valleys of shadow, invites us to join the pilgrim’s journey into the heart of God – so go to your homes tonight and take the newborn joy of this moment with you, and remember that it is always, always, available to you if you are humbly ready to receive it – to receive him – the dear Christ, who despite the darkness you feel will always enter in, bringing the love and joy and peace of God.

Let us pray: “O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.