

## **Sermons for the Journey**

The Rev. Duncan A. Burns

Christmas Eve – Year B

Sunday, December 24, 2017 at 11:00 PM

Christmas Eve Holy Eucharist is one of those profound moments in our lives that we can feel the incarnational presence of God in our hearts. All of heaven presses and gathers with us to celebrate the peace, hope, joy and love that God brings to humanity in the Christ child. We stand here with all the problems in our lives still with us, but for a moment or two, we feel the Kingdom of God in our hearts, that warm feeling of having the family together, the taste of Grandma's sugar cookies, the smell of pine in the air, the look of green wreaths with red bows and beautiful red poinsettias, the candles flickering on the aisles, the sound of the choir singing familiar carols so beautifully, and the deep sense of home that all those senses instill in our heart. Take a few moments this evening to enter our story. Join with a chorus of angels and the shepherds in the fields.

You may know that we do a Celtic Service at St. John's on Sunday nights. The Celts always felt eternity pressing in on them. They could take an ordinary situation like tending sheep in a field and get that Christmas like joy in their hearts. The Latin for this pressing in of eternity is "subspecies aeternitatus." God's Kingdom is as close as the feeling of peace in our heart. In today's culture, our lives are so contradictory to that feeling that it feels more like a candle that is so quickly blown out after the service. What the Celts were able to do is to have that feeling of peace in their everyday experiences.

Tonight open your hearts and minds to the truth that God loves you deeply just as you are and that humanity can be brought together to love one another by the birth of a child. Bernard of Clairvaux said, "You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of your eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms, and pierce our hearts with your soft, sweet cries."

Please try and enter the story through one of its characters and come face to face with this small child. Imagine the shepherds in the fields on a quiet, cool evening. The job of a shepherd was often given to the youngest or smallest child who could not yet do the heavy work. You may remember that David was a shepherd in these very hills. He was the small boy who would become one of the greatest Kings in Jerusalem. On Christmas Eve a long time ago, the shepherds were sitting quietly when an angel came before them and said, "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 Saviour, 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” (Luke 2:9-14).

The shepherds are amazed by this experience and travel to Bethlehem where they find Mary, Joseph and a child lying in the manger. They told their story to Mary and Joseph and everyone along the way and they not only warmed the heart of Mary that evening, but they warm the heart of everyone for all time that believes that there is a God in heaven. God cares about shepherds and fisherman, sinners and saints, Jews and gentiles, atheists and believers, the poor and the rich, the powerful and the helpless. God loves cuddly puppy dogs and sharp porcupines, cool mountain streams and dry hot deserts, in fact God loves everyone and everything for it was God that created us all. God calls us to live in peace with one another and in harmony with the earth. We are the shepherds who are called to take care of God’s flock and we are the stewards that God puts in charge of the vineyard.

Over one hundred years ago in 1914, World War I was raging in Europe. Over 16 million were killed and 21 million were wounded in that war. God’s love and grace was pressing in real hard on one particular night and for an instant, artillery guns were silent, machine guns were put down and poisonous gas was left untouched. In 1914, on Christmas Eve, the trench warfare subsided for a short time in some areas of Belgium. German soldiers put candles on trees, sang Christmas carols and shared gifts. British and French Troops responded by singing Christmas carols. Common carols such as silent night were even sung together. In some areas soldiers had services together and kept the peace until New Years. They exchanged tobacco, alcohol and souvenirs and amazingly even played matches of soccer with their enemies. When the command got wind of what was going on, the soldiers were ordered to resume killing each other. Moments of God’s grace and love are all around us such as the smile of a child on Christmas morning, the handshake of two family members that haven’t spoken to each other in years, the visit to a lonely neighbor, the card to an old friend, and Christians being tolerant of people with differing theologies, faiths, or viewpoints. This year has been particularly difficult for some in this country. Our economy has been extremely strong for almost a decade, yet people are more divided than I can ever remember in my life. At St. John’s I believe God’s plan is to be more tolerant, more diverse, more loving, more caring, and more compassionate.

As our culture becomes more intolerant and divided, Christ came that we might restore all people to wholeness. We have to be a beacon of light of Christ’s love in the coming year. Whether you come here every Sunday, once a month, or just for major holidays, you are welcome here. Whether you believe that Jesus was the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, fully human and fully divine or that Jesus was a prophet that ought to be followed, you are welcome at St. John’s. But I have to warn you. If you come here too often, you may notice that the Holy Spirit is alive in this church and the glory of God is libel to shine through your temporal reality.

Our music is so beautiful on this evening that it is incarnational. "Gloria, comes from the word, glory. The glory is the Jewish Shekinah. The glory is the The Divine Presence of God. In the Old Testament, the Presence of God, the glory of God, was the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. You could see the pillar of fire; you could see the cloud. The glory is ultra-bright. The glory is fiery light. The glory is the glow-ria of the angels in the sky. The glowing Presence of the angels in the sky becomes a glowing Presence of God in one's own heart. The glow is the fire within. When you realize that Christ is for you, your very own, you then begin to sense the glow-ria, an inner glow, a glow-ria in one's heart. And when there is a glow-ria in one's heart, one begins to sing the Gloria on one's lips" (Pastor Edward F. Marquart).

So I ask each of you to keep the possibility that Jesus Christ will come down from heaven this year and change the way you see the world. C.S. Lewis said in his essay, "The weight of Glory..." "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else." When we have the peace of God that passes all understanding in our hearts each and every day, we see the world anew. We are filled with thanksgiving that God would come to us in a humble manger as a tiny baby. So let us be glad this night and filled with joy! Let us sing to the Glory of the Lord! Let us worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Let the whole world tremble before God. Let all of heaven rejoice and let the earth be glad.

For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Alleluia, Alleluia.