

Christmas

Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

December 24th, 2007

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

The Tapestry of a Holy Night *The Rev. Richard E. Helmer*

*Wherever I go
Far away and anywhere*

*Time after time you always shine
through dark of night calling after me*

*And wherever I climb
Far away and anywhere*

*You raise me high beyond the sky
through stormy night lifting me above*

*Venite Spiritu et emitte caelitus
Venite Spiritu et emitte caelitus
Venite Spiritu Venite Spiritus*

*Whenever I cry
Far away and anywhere*

*You hear me call when shadows fall
your light of hope showing me the way**

What is it that makes this night holy? Is it the beauty of our music and the way it resonates deeply with memory, pulling at those deep places in the soul? For me it is the way things shimmer, almost imperceptibly, but if we stop and look, pause and listen, we notice something sparkles. We turn on the Christmas lights at night, after all, and light the candles in the darkness as the solstice arrives.

The tapestry of life is laid open in the darkness. Time seems to suspend and then unroll like a taut spring releasing its tensions. We see our lives open and bare in profoundly sad and profoundly joyous ways. Some sort of lift happens inside, and we relate to strange – foreign even – stories about shepherds, angels, a peasant family, and a tiny child.

Luke's Gospel tonight opens with an Emperor – Augustus. Like all great powers of this world, the Emperor speaks and the world responds. Joseph

and Mary, no-names among a beleaguered and impoverished people, are swept up in this great response, Bethlehem is overflowing with visitors so there is no room at the inn, the great wave of military, economic, and legal power seems to overwhelm this tiny, insignificant family.

And yet, the Emperor is now forgotten, a temporal power who must have been resplendent in his day but who will pass into obscurity. We still toss his name around in our calendar, but how many of us recall the deeds of Augustus on a regular basis? How many of us can imagine his visage or encounter it on a daily basis? How many of us can name and date the crowning achievement of his reign, his most clever political machination? Even the empire he expanded and established is gone, lost to the winds of history and the inevitable passing of one human hubris to another. Even the peoples whose ancestors he subjugated have forgotten his power, his influence. “The yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. . .” God has broken them utterly with the grind of time and an indomitable alternative for the human spirit – one that can be denied, but never eliminated.

No, this night, we know and say more about Mary, Joseph, and this little baby born in a backward village in ancient Judea than Caesar Augustus. Yes, you could argue I get paid to say that, but – well there’s more to it than that, surely! For you are all here tonight to recall the old story, perhaps hear it more deeply, revel in the music it has inspired, share it with your children perhaps, sing something that feels more a part of us than just about anything in our transient and fickle culture.

For the early Christian community, a small, pilgrim flock of people from every walk of life, there was something remarkable they recognized about Jesus. They called him “Christ,” “Messiah,” “Son of God.” They mined their sacred words for descriptions of him: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Even beyond their familiar scriptures, they saw in him the entire cosmos, the meaning of the human family, the essence of what it meant to have a purpose of compassionate living, a true holiness rooted in honest relationship, a thread running from the human heart directly into the bedrock of Creation, from our flesh, feelings, and thoughts rooted all of nature and whatever was behind it. They saw in him a path beyond death, a renewal of the entire way of being human, a self-giving love that dared real courage and integrity that seemed to come from beyond the self. And so they assigned him an almost legendary story of God come among us – legendary not because it is history or a-historical, but legendary because it describes something about a God beyond time who takes the whole universe and more and brings it down into a tiny, fragile child. And in doing so articulates an intimate connection between the divine and every galaxy, every planet, every person, every tiniest particle.

Christmas Eve is not about sentimentality, no matter how cynical our age

becomes, no matter how digital or commoditized. We reckon something holy to this night, because this night calls something holy forth in each of us, even with all the stresses of this time of year. Many of us pause, whether with exhaustion or breathless anticipation, or both, on the edge of a hope that we can barely put into words.

It is that notion that there is a Love that watches over our lives, no matter how stained, imperfect, and strange they become. A love that molds the stardust into forms like us, so that we might gather in praise to something. . . Someone even, who defies comprehension. Love that seems to transcend death, as we are reminded by, at very least, our memories this time of year of those who have come before: holiday seasons long past, and memories of loved ones no longer with us – memories sometimes so palpable we'd swear they're still with us. And we try to recreate that warmth we have known for ourselves, our own children, families, and friends.

A Child, tender, and fragile, is the light shining in the darkness. A light that cannot be overcome. The powerful can only wonder at powerlessness raised up to divine status. The arrogance of emperors, kings and princes, governors and elites, is suddenly seen for what it is in this single, solitary light.

A light, a Child who is the apple of Mary's eye, as she gazes in wonder at the miraculous like any mother does, like any parent who gazes into a newborn's eyes for the first time, a profound connection of flesh to flesh, bone to bone, an emotional bond that can be stretched and warped, but never quite completely severed.

Like God's relationship with us. For no matter where we run, we encounter this holiness in our lives. We might shrink from it or ignore it, but it haunts us, and if we let it, it remakes us. For we were all like this little child at one time, tender, and fragile.

And the message for us this night is unequivocal: we are precious in God's eyes. For God to embrace us in all of our imperfect and jumbled up genetics, our awkward limbs and oversized heads, our existential conflicts, our potential for acts of greatness as well as cowardice and even wickedness. . . well, what more loving act could God have than to become one of us? To remind us in our existential darkness that we are not alone. That we belong to God and one another, just as Jesus belongs to God and to Mary beyond words, to Joseph, too, who stands by watching in awe.

To the shepherds, as well, who are sweaty and smelly, outcasts as we are all outcasts somewhere, sweaty and smelly as we sometimes are, too. We are remarked upon by angels, watched over by a strange sense that we cannot quite shake: that we matter. We matter to Someone, somewhere, somehow, even beyond death.

Now, isn't that worth singing about, gathering for, hoping for this time of year. . .and perhaps anytime?

For we are a Christmas people, re-born this time of year for renewal. . .that we may not pass without remark, no matter how short or long life lasts.

*Wherever I go
Far away and anywhere*

*Time after time you always shine
through dark of night calling after me*

*And wherever I climb
Far away and anywhere*

*You raise me high beyond the sky
through stormy night lifting me above*

*Venite Spiritu et emitte caelitus
Venite Spiritu et emitte caelitus
Venite Spiritu Venite Spiritus*

*Whenever I cry
Far away and anywhere*

*You hear me call when shadows fall
your light of hope showing me the way**

Amen.

* Libera: *Far Away*, <http://www.libera.org.uk/lyrics.htm>