

Christmas Eve 2008 10 PM
Mark Belletini

Welcome,
Prelude,
Kindling
Opening Words

We are here
under the hidden arch of December stars
to worship in the windy dark night,
and sing the carols, and tell the story
as we once again think with our hearts
and feel with our minds
to bless the ancient feast of Christmas with joy.

**And blest all the more is that stubborn imagination which insists that tomorrow's
peace might begin today. Blest is good will towards all. Amen.**

Carol 225 O Come O Come Emmanuel

Sequence

And what would it be like,
if on this indigo candlelit night,
we could borrow the eyes,
and take loan of the heart
of new parents gazing at their newborn?
What would it be like
if we could then gaze upon the world
with those same eyes,
and respond to it with that same heart?
Would we want to do anything for that world?
Would we want to hold it close,
even when it cried out,
especially when it cried out?
Would we feel awe and tenderness
much of the time,
astonished that the world is
struggling, hungry, reaching, learning
to smile?
If we could hold the world against us
like we might hold a child,
and feel that sweet warmth against
our own breast,
would we weep in joy and laugh in hope?

*Would we see new stars in the sky,
and feel the wise gathering around us
to remind us that everything is a gift
more precious than any gold, or incense,
even ourselves, even the world of our lives?
Could we smile then,
filled and emptied of hope's imagination
at the exact same time,
and keep a long, luscious, and perfect silence?*

Silence for a time

Music

The First Reading *this evening is from Luke's gospel, written some sixty years after the death of Jesus, probably in Antioch.*

The Emperor Augustus issued a decree calling for a census of the whole inhabited world. This was the first census, actually, the one which the Syrian governor, Quirinius, organized in the East. So a man named Joseph, who had been working in the Galilee, traveled south with Mary, his fiancée, to Bethlehem, which was where his family home was located. Mary was due to give birth any day. And indeed, it was while they were in Bethlehem that Mary gave birth to her first-born child. But because Joseph's home was crowded, they took their newborn to the part of the house where the animals were sleeping, to use the feeding trough as his first crib. In that manger they laid him, wrapping him up tight according to custom.

Nearby some young shepherders were keeping a night-watch on their flocks. Suddenly a messenger from G-d appeared to them, and a bright light blazed around them, and they were all scared to death.

But the messenger comforted them with these words: "Don't be scared. I bring good news! I bring you joy! For today in the village a child has been born, who is the anointed one of G-d, a savior. This is how you will distinguish him. Like every newborn he is wrapped up tight, but a cattle-feeder serves as his cradle."

Suddenly, the messenger was joined by a whole chorus of angels, singing praises.
"The glory of God is this:
peace among the people,
and good will toward all."

Carol #231 Angels We Have Heard

The Second Reading *comes from the theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, her earliest book, The Radical Kingdom, 1970*

Within the bounds of present life, struggle itself is its own reward. It is in the process of struggle against debased existence, with the attendant demands for becoming more sensitive, more self-disciplined, with a constant resetting of one's sights upon the vision of salvation, that one is closest to the secret of human life. Such a struggle, even in its failure and disappointment, is...a time of community, commitment, and ecstatic hopefulness, the highest point of living. The time of expectation is the time when we come closest to experiencing the spirit dwelling in the human community. In such a time of struggle one feels closest to one's sister and brother. One glimpses what true family and community might mean.

Carol # 238 Within the Shining

The Third Reading *comes from the ecstatic poet, the Rumi of America, as I call him, James Broughton. This is his Confession, written in 1983.*

Even if I never arrive
 I shall keep departing
I believe in the unreachable,
the unlikely, and the unmentionable.

Moses never got there
 Jesus never got there
Buddha went there but came back
Lao-Tzu simply packed up and left

Anywhere that I await
 my traveler's alert
I rely upon the dimensionless,
the immediate, and the imperishable.

Imagination is
 my praise of truth
The beauty of humanity
is my hope and my sorrow

Wherever I may be landing
 or hoping for takeoff
I swear by affection,
Exuberance, and clarity

Carol #232 The Hills Are Bare At Bethlehem

Homily

I had a very different sermon prepared for this evening, and I tossed it just a few hours ago. A more sparkling, effervescent sermon, it was.

As I was just finishing the last rewrite of the text, my sister Lynne called and told me that our brother Robert, a recovering alcoholic, had relapsed. He was a complete mess when she went to pick him up and bring him to our parents' house for Christmas Eve. Yellow eyes, unkempt, depressed. Drunk. Unable to stand up.

We spent a long time talking about what to do next. We still don't know...after all, it's Christmas Eve, not the best time to pursue detox options.

But I was aware that I just didn't have it in me to deliver a sermon based on the reality that I was part of before my sister called. The tougher reality that seizes my heart now has to be the basis of my reflections tonight. There can be no clarity, no affection, no honesty, no real exuberance for the holiday without facing the harder truths. After all, hope is the theme of this season, remember. And hope is not cheap optimism, which is often just a cowardly sense of entitlement, but rather, hope is the mainspring of a life that neither denies the past nor romances the future.

But it seems to me that hope in the midst of hard reality is the *purpose* of the Christmas story Luke tells. A story of poverty, heavy taxes, and a difficult family situation is hardly a pretty tale for children all dolled up with pink bows. Birth itself is not an easy thing....ask any woman. ...especially back in those days. The shepherds in the story may have had a wondrous experience, but from all we know about the shepherds of ancient times, their reputation wasn't much better than a gang of modern thugs. They were not the kind of folks anyone would want crowding into their maternity room...

The Christmas story is a story with lots of tough elements in it. But think. How many stories of people you know are not fraught with hardship and difficulties? Most life-stories I can think of, my own story included, and yours, fill the bill almost as well as this ancient story.

And yet, in the midst of the Christmas story, which makes the difficulties plain and obvious, we hear...like some far off angel-song...that something remarkable is still possible in this world. Something like hope is stirring. Something that might not be as obvious as the march of legions, the sound of the war trumpet, or the clatter of coins on the tax table. But still something...tender skin, skin still red and wet, a voice crying out, new life.

A fresh start.

The story doesn't describe the birth as miraculous at all. According to what we know from medical manuals of the time, like the writing of Soranus of Ephesus, the birth depicted in the story was very typical. Doctor Soranus recommended that newborns be laid in a nest of hay, a pressed down channel of the house cattle feeder, so that the child wouldn't be able to turn over. Wrapped up tight in small strips of cloth already moistened

with olive oil, the baby was protected from accidentally hurting its own eyes with its roaming hands. Both pre-natal and post-natal care for peasant babies was quite sophisticated. Just because people are poor doesn't mean they don't know anything, you see. Just because the Romans were oppressive didn't mean everyone just gave up. Just because taxes were high and unfair didn't mean people just laid down and died.

No, they lived and struggled to make the best life they could.

And please, they weren't waiting around for a Messiah to come along either. That is a Sunday School fairy tale. It is simply not true. Oh, there were a few eccentric folks in Judea who talked about anointed characters that might come along one day...always in the plural, mind you, never anything called "THE messiah." They imagined there might be a clever anointed priest one day who would help explain things better. Or some wiley warrior king who would work with the priest to push foreign oppression away. But they were not sitting around waiting for some special godlike being to be born and change everything once and for all, make the world perfect, bring heaven down to earth and fasten it tight. No, none of that.

The reason people teach this fairy tale is because of theology. The earliest students of Jesus knew him as a person, a fellow peasant. But those who came after him didn't know him as a peasant, only as an idea, the subject of wonderful stories. So they tried to fit him into their theological framework to try and make sense of these stories. So they took all of these strange ideas of anointed characters from the fringes of Judaism, and said that he was, in Hebrew, ha-meshiakh, in Greek ho-khristos, or in English, The Messiah, or the Christ. They were taking all of these distinct ideas and combining them into one super Messiah. It was their way of trying to show how much they thought of him. How much they regarded him. How much they loved him. But within only 40 years of his death, people like Paul were calling him, not by his name, but by this newly invented tribute. Christ Jesus, Paul called him, not Jesus, the son of Mary, or Jesus of Galilee.

But he himself was just a peasant artisan. Born in a poor family, probably somewhere up in the Galilee. Born of parents who were not, I repeat, not, waiting for a Messiah.

Oh, they were waiting of course. Just not for a Messiah. They waited for the crops to come in. They waited for the midwife to arrive on time for the birthing. They waited for the honey production to finish. They waited for the wine to ferment. They waited for the bread to rise. They waited for the storm to pass, the temper to soften, the love to return, the child to fall asleep. They were, I think, a lot like us.

They had to struggle to get by. Like us. The economy wasn't any better then than it is now. Ups and downs. Bad decisions and terrible consequences. But Rosemary Radford Reuther has this to say about struggle:

Within the bounds of present life, struggle itself is its own reward. It is in the process of struggle against debased existence, with the attendant demands for becoming more

sensitive, more self-disciplined, with a constant resetting of one's sights upon the vision of salvation, that one is closest to the secret of human life.

The secret of human life. Large words, those.

Yet somehow they ring as true to me.

Struggle is its own reward. What does that mean? I think of the struggle my family will now be facing with my brother's deep despair, his debased sense of self and vision. I think of the decisions that will have to be made, the struggle to understand. Rosemary Reuther continues:

Such a struggle, even in its failure and disappointment, is... a time of community, commitment, and ecstatic hopefulness: the highest point of living. The time of expectation is the time when we come closest to experiencing the spirit dwelling in the human community. In such a time of struggle one feels closest to one's sister and brother.

Indeed.

I think of my family of origin, my brother and my sister, a family no different in many ways from that ancient family we lift up each Christmas. Mediterranean peasants. Living with expectations, yes, they, for the next crop and for the storm to pass, yes, we, for my brother's life to become honest and healthy again, but struggling and struggling to live out lives in the midst of all that expectation.

But, like they had in ancient times, we too have a few tools to help us as we struggle.

Mary was not an educated gynecologist, like Soranus of Ephesus. But she had a peasant's sense of medicine, and peasants, as I often remind us, were not at all foolish. She very well understood the uses of olive oil, strips of cloth and a bed of hay.

My sister and I are not professional alcoholism workers. But we are not foolish either. We have a peasant sense of psychology, and understand the uses of patience, and direct naming of issues, supportive conversation, and interventions. Heck, we even have the internet, the yellow pages, and wise friends too!

Just as, in the story, the couple has to travel far before the birth begins, so will my sister and brother and I. We will start on that journey many times perhaps, and perhaps the outcome will not be as beautiful as in the Christmas story...who knows? It's hardly like hope comes with promises tied to it with bows. But in the words of James Broughton:

Even if I never arrive

I shall keep departing

I believe in the unreachable,

the unlikely, and the unmentionable.

I do believe in my brother's sobriety. I know that many struggles, many journeys, DO end in transformation, in new birth, in unmentionable angels cartwheeling in the background and singing lovely theology: God's glory is not like Caesar's, full of sound and fury, pocked with weapons and cruelty: it's people, ordinary people, peasants and everyone, at peace, getting along, cooperating, honest, and not afraid. It's good will and all that.

But the struggle itself, says Reuther, is the reward. The struggle to be honest, to embrace the difficult. And this is the struggle my sister's phone call offered me tonight. Not the gift I was expecting. But a sacred call nonetheless.

And so I close this little Christmas Eve homily, this sermon preached on this o so holy night of candlelit stories when the imagination is at its yearly peak, with these words of Broughton:

*Imagination is my praise of truth
The beauty of humanity
is my hope and my sorrow*

*Wherever I may be landing
or hoping for takeoff
I swear by affection,
Exuberance, and clarity*

Music

Offertory

Blest is our shared hope, our common life,
and the circle of our community, which
is enriched each year at this time by visitors and guests. Blest is our circle of care,
celebration, and hope.

Let the offering we now give and receive
be a sign of our own vision of a world
transformed by mutual cooperation and
a steady peace.

Blessing of Bread and Light

The bread is a sign that no one may be kept away from the table. As said the man whose mythic birth is celebrated tonight: "They shall come from North and South and East and West, all of them...and feast together..."

The firelight is a sign that though each human light is welcome and worthy, together in community we make a greater light, one that may illumine the world.

Blest is the bread of life. Blest is the light of love. Blest is this night, o holy night of love, o holy night of light, story, silence, song and peace. Amen.

Candlelighting *while music plays*

at the end, hold hands if possible and sing

Silent Night, holy night
all is calm, all is bright,
round yon virgin mother and child
holy infant so tender and mild
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.

Blessing

May the peace and hope proclaimed by this night service begin in our lives as we move toward the new year. Let it radiate out from our lives like light from a thousand candles. This being so, let there be peace, let there be hope, let there be love. Amen.

Music
Kindling the Christmas Candelabrae
Silent Nocturne
Circle Carol
Blessing of the Assembly
The Closing Act of Communion