

Christmas Eve L&C Service

Homily

December 24, 2018

P. Potter

I speak to you this evening in the name of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen

Tonight is a special night. We are not yet asleep with visions of sugar plums and all the rest. Many of us are still getting ready, with our wrapping, our baking and our prayers. And so our service this evening is a service of preparation – preparation for Christmas and preparation for what comes after. Certainly, we are remembering the blessed event of 2000 + years ago. And perhaps we should also consider that tonight we are commemorating what the human race did not know so many years ago, that the Son of God would be born in humble circumstances – unremarked, but by a few. For most, it was just another ordinary day, like every other day that's ever been. We now know that it wasn't just an ordinary day – it was a day that would come to be celebrated for thousands of years.

But at the time, who knew?? We are invited to wonder, what would it have taken for people to be aware, to be ready to hear the good news that unto us is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Would it have taken a proclamation from Caesar, an affirmation from worldly authorities? Well Caesar was already doing that – calling his world to be registered – but really only to proclaim himself and his worldly authority.

Would it have taken an eclipse, or some other cosmic sign to provide evidence of the presence of the divine in the world? During the solar eclipse last year and another I witnessed several years back in India, and at many a lunar eclipse, at the recent sight of a comet coursing through the heavens we see crowds of people looking up at the sky, from ancient temples and modern malls, from rural retreats and urban forests, from dusty alleyways and traffic-bound streets. Looking to the skies, for inspiration, for answers. And back in the day, at that wonder-filled and awesome time among the dispossessed peoples of the Holy Land,

there was indeed the new star in the heavens, there for everyone to see – but only a few knew what it meant.

Indeed, there were no official notices about the coming of the Christ. The night of Jesus' birth, all was quiet. Just another ordinary night. That such an event as the birth of Jesus, the Word made flesh, the incarnation of God in the world – unremarkable in its immediate circumstance but blessedly remarkable in its implications – that such an event would have passed virtually unnoticed by the world is itself really quite remarkable. I mean for heaven's sake the first child born each new year gets better press coverage than the birth of Jesus did at the time!

All of which testifies to the transcendent strangeness of God's work in the world. We can't predict it, we can't explain it. It just is. And all we can do is be ready. But we can be ready. We can make a highway in the wilderness for God's Kingdom. We can prepare the way of the Lord. Not just a Christmas, but every day. Quietly, faithfully.

As we live into tonight's service of lessons and carols, let us recall and embrace the mystical tradition of quiet preparation for service to God's kingdom. The great theologian Dorothee Soellee reminds us that God draws near in the time of quietness, the time of stillness, the time of mystic expectancy. And at such times we become empowered to find joy, to find each other, to find God amidst the tumult of life. And so we strive to look past that tumult, past the noise, past the glitz, to the stillness of stable, to the quietness that allows us to be ready, to be ready, for the Christ born to us.

We might recall that when it came to pass in those days so long ago, some indeed had the vision to get ready. Some were already in the process of preparation. Some were ordinary folks, like Mary and Joseph and Zechariah and Elizabeth, trying to live lives of righteousness under difficult circumstances. Some, like the Magi, were foreigners, migrants, but also observers of the world who had studied the ancient prophecies and were ready to celebrate that holy birth in Bethlehem.

Some, like the shepherds, were simple laborers living rough, in the fields, trying to get through the night, whose very humility allowed them to hear when the heavenly host called them to be witnesses at the manger. As the great tune “Christmas Must be Tonight” by the Band, put it, (“saw it with my one eyes, written up in the skies, but why a simple herdsman such as I”). Their very lack of circumstance allowed them to witness the miracle of Christ’s birth (“why a simple herdsman such as I”). What it took, so long ago, was not proclamations and ceremony, but a transcendent, fundamental, quiet readiness for God’s presence. What it took to become aware of the coming of the Christ was the quietness to hear the small still voice of the Holy One. To “Be still and know the presence of God.”

And so, on this Christmas Eve, let us be ready to receive God in our hearts. In our tumultuous world – tossed and turned by political and economic forces largely beyond our control, discouraged by the violence and injustice of our world (not unlike the world of Palestine 2000 years ago) –

let us ask for grace to quiet our hearts and be joyful that the one in our midst is indeed the Holy One of Israel.

Tonight of all nights, let us as a community of faith be continually ready to welcome God into our lives. At a time when much of the world treats Christmas as the just a chance to sell us more stuff, on this last evening before the great feast of Christmas when celebration is the watchword of the day (as indeed it should be), tonight let us be still. Let us be still enough to hear the quiet voice of God, speaking to us across the millennia, across the vast distances of creation, across the divisions that cloud our understanding. And let us hear that quiet call to lives of love and compassion, to ministries of service to the needy, care for the stranger, and peace for all. For the Kingdom of Heaven has indeed come near.

Let us be ready, let us be inspired by our faith in the incarnation of God born a child of humble origins, in a stable, on that lonely night, so long ago. Merry Christmas.