

Genuine Terror and Genuine Delight: The Courage to Be Christ's Mass
A Sermon for Saint John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, Saint Paul, MN
by the Rev. Craig Lemming, Associate Rector
Christmas Eve: Monday, December 24, 2018

In the name of the Triune God, who gathers all things earthly and heavenly together into one. Amen.

Merry Christmas to you all! For those who are visiting St. John's this evening, an especially warm welcome to each of you. This is my first Christmas Eve sermon, and truthfully, I am in equal parts delighted and terrified to preach God's love in this sacred place tonight. And yet, this comingling of genuine terror and genuine delight in me connects with the genuine terror and genuine delight that is felt in between the familiar phrases of Holy Scripture generations of human beings have ritually gathered to listen to every Christmas. In the words of Howard Thurman, **"there is something in every one of [us] that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine"** – the sound of the genuine in ourselves and in others, so that when we recognize the genuine in one another, **"the wall that separates and divides us will disappear and we will become one because the sound of the genuine makes the same music."**¹ As you journey with me into the Word proclaimed in Isaiah and Luke tonight, may all of us, in our genuine, particular, and beautiful differences be gathered together in unity; to genuinely love and belong to each other and to God: who is with all of us eternally in Christ Jesus.

**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.²**

Written about 800 years before the birth of Jesus, the Prophet Isaiah's song of thanksgiving answered the hopes of people who suffered under the burden of their oppressors' yoke. Oppression symbolized by darkness, garments rolled in blood, boots of tramping warriors, and the rod – a painful bar across their weary shoulders, ruthlessly imposed upon them by their colonizers. Many shoulders are still weighed down in agony today. I felt this weight myself as I contemplated TIME Magazine's Top 100 Photographs of 2018.³ The weight of human suffering was communicated in haunting images: the barefooted man wearing nothing but the clothes on his back fleeing the California wild fires; two migrants with a baby being passed between them, risking their lives to cross the border; the emaciated body of a starving seven-year-old child in Yemen; migrant children separated from their parents at the US border; teenagers leaving their school after surviving the gun massacre in Parkland, Florida; the boy who lost both of his legs in a bomb explosion in Afghanistan; the two-year-old Honduran girl screaming in terror as her mother is detained at the US border; the man standing with a shovel near the graves of his friends who were murdered at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh; and the image that made me weep – the young Kenyan man comforting the last male Northern White Rhino on the planet, just before that gorgeous animal died.⁴

As we reflect on this year that is almost past, TIME Magazine's essay of photos from 2018 revealed to me that we are still "the people who walk in darkness." Even now, 2,800 years after the words of the Prophet Isaiah were proclaimed in terror and delight, we still long for that child who is born for us. The child who comes to set us free from oppressive governments ruled by malignant narcissists. The child who breaks the painful bar across our weary shoulders that yokes us to ceaseless gun violence; to epidemics of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; to poverty, addiction, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. We long for that child who was born to love immigrants, widows, orphans, and every outcast society shuns. We long for that child who is the author of peace, justice, and righteousness for all people. That child is proclaimed in Luke's Gospel – the Gospel which speaks most vividly to our shared human suffering and emphasizes God's compassion for the marginalized members of society: women, the less-than-pious, tax collectors, the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the despised foreigner. In Luke's Gospel, the child promised by Isaiah does not arrive in the magnificent splendor, wonder, and might of a conquering hero. No, that child is born to an unwed teenage mother, who in genuine terror and genuine delight, wrapped her child in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger – a feeding trough for animals – because there was no room for them in the inn.⁵

**With the poor, the scorned, the lowly,
Lived on earth our Savior holy.**

**He was little, weak, and helpless,
Tears and smiles, like us he knew
And he feeleth for our sadness,
And he shareth in our gladness.⁶**

What I love about Luke's Gospel is that it is not the elite, it is not the well-to-do; it is not the highly educated; neither the emperor nor the governor; but shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.⁷ Homeless, unwashed, gruff, hard-working, illiterate vagabonds are prioritized in Luke's account of God's Incarnation. Pause with me a while, as I reminisce about my boy soprano days.

As my parents (who are here tonight) can attest, for several years, from about the age of eleven or twelve, I sang in the annual performances of Handel's *Messiah* at the Anglican Cathedral in Harare. As adolescence set in, my changing teenage voice, in that abominable season of unholy bleating that all young men experience, I was banished from the soprano section, to the alto section; then to the bass section, and finally to the tenor section where my voice finally settled. Before my voice changed, however, I sang the three soprano recitatives which tell of the Angel appearing in God's glory to shepherds abiding in the fields – and I was fabulous! In my day, I could pop out those two high A's flawlessly before the multitude of the heavenly host join the Angel in singing the *Gloria*. I love that

moment in Handel's *Messiah*, and I love the fact that shepherds are at the center of the Angel's divine revelation that Mary's son is our Savior, the Messiah who is Christ the Lord. The lowliest of all people; literally sitting in darkness; symbolically sitting in the darkness of Roman oppression: it is upon them that the glory of God shone! In their genuine terror and genuine delight, it is their faithful response to God's revelation that makes them heroic. In fear, the shepherds are courageous: **"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."**⁸ They leave everything they have and go with haste to find Mary, Joseph, and the child in the manger; a decision that is heroic. Heroic in the sense described by philosopher Erich Fromm, who wrote that true **"heroes are those with the courage to leave what they have – their land, their family, their property – and move, not without fear, but without succumbing to their fear."**⁹ The shepherds leave everything they have to see and to be with Jesus. Jesus, whom Erich Fromm describes as **"the hero of love, a hero without power, who did not use force, who did not want to rule, who did not want to *have* anything. [Jesus]... a hero of being, of giving, of sharing."**¹⁰ Episcopal theologian John Westerhoff writes, **"Erich Fromm contends that two modes of existence are struggling for the spirit of humankind: the *having* mode, which concentrates on material possession, acquisitiveness, power, and aggression and is the basis for**

such universal spiritual evils as greed, envy, and violence; and the *being* mode, which is based on love, in the pleasure of sharing, in concern for the good of others.¹¹ TIME Magazine's Top 100 photographs of 2018 disclose the truth: that the greed, envy, and violence of the having mode are making this a land of deep darkness. The proposition of Luke's Gospel invites us to reorient ourselves to the shepherds' mode of being; the being mode of those who are highly favored by God.¹² Luke's shepherds teach us that God doesn't care about what we have. God only cares about who we are! Erich Fromm writes,

[the Being mode] creates one of the deepest forms of human happiness: shared enjoyment. Nothing unites people more (without restricting their individuality) than sharing [our] admiration and love for a person; sharing an idea, a piece of music, a painting, a symbol; sharing in a ritual – and sharing sorrow. The experience of sharing makes and keeps the relation between two individuals alive.¹³

Christmas teaches us that the abundant life of Christ has nothing to do with the houses we have, the jobs we have, the degrees we have; the cars, or clothes, or phones, or *anything* we have. Luke's Christmas story teaches us who we are: human *beings*. In the words of Desmond Tutu, **"a person is a person through other persons."** When we put away our selfish ways, to intentionally be together, to share, and to give: this is being fully alive in God's glory.

In genuine terror and genuine delight, Luke's shepherds leave all they have and go with haste to be with and to share in the immense joy of Christ's birth with Mary, Joseph, and everyone else, who were amazed at what the shepherds told them.¹⁴ We have left all we have and hastened to be here together; to share in our love of God and in our love of one another. As we share in the beauty of holiness – in sacred words, music, art, and symbols in tonight's Feast of the Incarnation; this shared enjoyment of being together creates the deepest joy that our violent, exhausted, isolated, addicted, lonely, suffering world is aching to know again.

In closing, beloved friends, remember that God calls us to reject the having mode of Rome, Caesar, and Empire, and to fully embrace the being mode of the Triune God of right-relationship! When we are courageous enough to be who we are, fully alive as beloved images of God, genuinely "zealous for good deeds,"¹⁵ the sacred essence of our very being communicates the infectious Spirit of the living God who creates Beloved Community, vanquishes the gross darkness of oppressive Empire, and resurrects all of Creation to new life!

**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.**¹⁶

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

¹ <http://www.dailygood.org/story/1846/the-sound-of-the-genuine-howard-thurman/>

² Isaiah 9:2 (NRSV).

³ time.com/2018-photos/

⁴ <http://time.com/5209390/sudan-rhino-rhinoceros-northern-white/>

⁵ Luke 2:7.

⁶ <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/events/chapel-services/nine-lessons.html>

⁷ Luke 2:8.

⁸ Luke 2:15.

⁹ Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* Reprint ed. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 94.

¹⁰ Fromm, 122.

¹¹ John H. Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People: Learning through the Church Year* (New York: Seabury Press, 2005), 91.

¹² Exodus 3:14.

¹³ Fromm, 99.

¹⁴ Luke 2:17-18.

¹⁵ Titus 2:14.

¹⁶ Isaiah 9:2