

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
December 24, 2013
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

This is the night of mystery and of wonder— the night of starlight and of candlelight, of joy and of yearning. The night of hopes and of fears— those deeply rooted traditions that carry with them both comfort and anxiety, healing and woundedness. Many of us face Christmas Eve services with trepidation knowing that we—perhaps every soul in the filled church—bring expectations woven of memories of other Christmas Eves, those that were perfect, those that were disappointments. And every soul is waiting for one more of those numinous experiences where it seemed that the veil between heaven and earth became so transparent as to have disappeared. Where everything was holy and the candlelight and carols gave wings to the heart and unmeasured joy.

Which one was it? Was it that year in your childhood when you could scarcely contain your excitement over the tempting packages under the Christmas tree? When you had to go to church with your family BEFORE the unwrapping could begin and you could see if one of those boxes contained that doll or that train that you wanted with all your heart? And in your impatience and excitement, the specialness of being in church at night, holding your very own candle in your fist, singing “Silent Night” with the rest of the congregation turned your wide eyes into stars?

Or was it that first year you were so much in love, wondering if it would be the night he popped the question (or the she said, “yes.”)? And the fragrance of the pine boughs melded with the scent of melting wax and you were enveloped in warmth?

Or, perhaps, the year that you had your very own firstborn child and you felt so keenly the drama of Mary’s and Joseph’s story and the love welled up within you?

Was it the year that you were alone and lonely, unsure of the future, wanting so desperately that which no longer could be? And the familiar words of scripture and melodies and the swell of the organ surrounded you with the palpable presence of Emmanuel, God with us, and hope bloomed in your heart?

What is it about this one night of the year that holds such weight and significance for us? Is it simply the anticipation of Advent coming to fulfillment, the end-product of the preparation for our annual celebrations of gift-giving and feasting? Is that all there is? Has the crescendo of events from the first Sunday of Advent to this night just fooled us into thinking there is something real and lasting before we go back to life as usual?

Some of us may come here wondering about this glorious God-given gift of the Incarnation, meant to show us God and teach us how we are to be as God’s people. Wondering, hoping that it is so. If we look at the world outside our door, we don’t see much improvement in humanity since that sacred event long ago. There are the homeless, the poor, the oppressed, in what seems to be ever-increasing numbers. We may be tempted to believe that what we celebrate tonight is just a nice story with no lasting value.

And yet, it has lasted. For more than 2,000 years! We, and people in all ages, hold onto it and the hope that God's realm will one day be fulfilled just as God has always intended for creation. The reality of that hope is this. This celebration does not end tomorrow. It is a new beginning each year. A new beginning in our faith journeys that offers each of us the possibility of truly receiving the gift of Christ's birth. And accepting that it is a gift that calls out for our response. It demands that we take the warmth that surges through us this night as the candle's flame passes from person to person and illuminates the sanctuary and let it shape us and our faith and our very lives. It demands that we, each one of us, be a part of bringing about God's realm.

The stories we hear, the carols we sing this night, proclaim a message that is impossible and irrational to our reasoning minds. And yet, there is that breathless hope that is born/reborn over and over again. There is the divine light that surpasses in glory and in blinding brightness the most elaborate of Christmas displays we erect in our homes and towns. For it is the wondrous gift, the most wondrous gift ever given. The Incarnation. Emmanuel. God with us. Let it grasp you and hold you. Then grasp onto the mystery and the wonder yourself and do not let go. Nurture the flame to keep it alight. And let the memory of the magic of this night warm you when you are cold, feed you when you hunger, and give you the will and the spirit to serve in Christ's name. Always.

Amen and amen.