

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois
December 24, 2014
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

A song from the 1966 Broadway musical, *Mame*—a song about rolling out the holly, Santa, carols by the spinet—hardly seemed like what should be floating through my brain this morning, particularly as I sipped my coffee and listened to the glorious sounds of Kings College, Cambridge, Christmas Lessons and Carols!

But there we are. Oh, there have been lovely and meaningful moments this season—our own Lessons and Carols, our Advent retreat, gatherings with friends. And yet, it has been a hard season with all of the frightening and disturbing events in the world around us. I don't know about you, but I "need a little Christmas."

I need this place tonight with its candles, its Christmas greens and reds and whites, its gathering of well-known faces and those that are new, all drawn together to hear the Story, to sing the familiar carols, to rest for a time in the warmth—the wonder—of God's promise to humanity, the Incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us.

I need this just as folk always have in other difficult times—times of personal loss and struggle, times of crisis in our own nation and the world.

That very first Christmas Eve so long ago was not one of heavenly peace, was it? It was a time of hardship and oppression for most of the people. It was a long and treacherous trip for all who trekked to Bethlehem for the enforced registration. Yet, it was into such a time and place that the star appeared, that hope burst through in the form of a helpless, tiny child born to a humble couple.

And so it has been. Two years ago in the immediate aftermath of Newtown. One hundred years ago at the start of "the war to end all wars." In the 1860s when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the lyrics to a hymn when his son was severely injured in the Civil War.

"I heard the bells on Christmas Day," he wrote.
The old familiar carols play
And wild and sweet, the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Then, after a few more verses, he went on,

And in despair I bowed my head.
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

But he wasn't finished:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men."

For through his despair, the hope burst through. Just as it did, though briefly, on the European battlefield where English and French, German and Scot laid down their weapons, shared provisions, and for a time lifted their voices in carols—the same carols in their various languages.

That, I believe, is what this night is all about. Hope. The promise that is always with us, in good times and in times of trouble, even when we might have a hard time finding it. The hopes and fears of all the years that meet in the Christ Child this night. The thrill of hope that causes a weary world to rejoice.

If only we could remember—all of us—that it is not just this one night of mystery and wonder. Not that one night long ago, or any of the Christmas Eves in between. This is only the beginning, a new beginning each time we gather. It is a breathless hope that is born and reborn over and over again. A hope that breaks into our ordinary ways of knowing and of being so that we can enter into the realm where the God of love and compassion lives. A hope that offers us the possibility of truly receiving the gift of Christ's birth. And a hope that demands our response-- that we take the warmth that surges through us this night as the candle's flame passes from person to person and illuminates the church and let it shape us and our faith and our very lives. Let it spread to the far corners of the earth, to those like us and unlike us. And not just for the night. But for always as we strive to bring God's realm of peace and good will into being.

Poet Ann Weems tells us

The Christmas spirit
is that hope
which tenaciously clings
to the hearts of the faithful
and announces

in the face
of any Herod the world can produce
and all the inn doors slammed in our faces
and all the dark nights of our souls
that with God
all things still are possible,
that even now
unto us
a Child is born!

Amen and amen.