

**Song of Joy©**  
**December 15, 2013**

**Luke 1:46b-55; Philippians 4:4-7**

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Today we continue our Advent focus on the candle-lighting themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love and on Advent and Christmas hymns. I always love this Sunday when we focus on joy. The joy of Christmas is something to consider each year, and the longer I live, the more I see the paradox of living in this world full of fear and violence, yet somehow being able to have Hope and joy.

And today's hymn is "O Little Town of Bethlehem." I love this sweet Christmas carol. When we sing it, I always have this feeling of peaceful joy that settles within me, thinking of that city so long ago when Jesus was born.

Yet, even Bethlehem, the birthplace of our Lord, is fraught with problems that would make one think there might not be any joy to be found.

The city of Bethlehem has a population of around 60,000 people (although that number varied, depending on where I searched). It has declined over the years with Christians moving out of the city, for fear of being persecuted by Palestinian Arabs.

Bethlehem is located just 6 miles south of Jerusalem and was turned over to the Palestinian National Authority after an agreement in 1995. *Bet Lehem*, the Hebrew name for Bethlehem means *House of Bread*.

It is also known as *The City of David*, as it is the birthplace of King David in the Old Testament – an ancestor of Jesus. And it is the town where Isaac's beloved wife, Rachel, was buried.

Erik Kolbell, the author of the resource I'm using as a study for these Advent sermons writes: "Bethlehem today is a Palestinian city that is ever under the watchful eye of the Israeli armed forces that have invaded the city twice.

The traditional site of the birth of Christ, it is also the birthplace of the second intifada which, in 2001, destroyed much of the economy and infrastructure of the town.

There is widespread poverty there, as with much of Palestine, and movement from the city into Israel and vice versa is not easy. Indeed, if Mary and Joseph had to make their pilgrimage today they would pass through ten Israeli checkpoints.

All parties and all nationalities pray for peace to come to this hallowed place but there are so many forces at work to stifle those prayers."

Still, there is something about this carol, written in 1868, by Phillip Brooks, an Episcopal minister of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, that speaks to quiet calm, of hope and peace and joy as we consider the event of Jesus' birth.

*O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie,  
Above the deep and endless sleep  
The silent stars go by.*

I can't help but think of the shepherds that night, outside of the city, watching over the sheep, dozing off, suddenly startled as they are awakened by a glorious light and the chorus of angels telling the good news of hope and peace and joy in the birth of a Savior – Christ the Lord.

But when those Messengers had gone and the night was back to normal, simply lit by stars and moon, did they question if they had really seen; really heard this hopeful news?

And so, instead of brushing it off to some crazy, corporate dream or hallucination, they got up and they made the hike into Bethlehem, looking for this baby Christ Child.

I can imagine them entering the sleeping village. Just hours before, it would have been full of noisy, busy crowds but somehow, now, they've all found a place to be tucked into, sleep has over taken the chaos and it is quiet, hushed, calm and dark.

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

Have you ever given much thought to those two lines?

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.*

At Christmas, especially at Christmas, we make use of lights, don't we? We have lights on our Christmas trees, lights on our houses, on wreaths, we have candles lit in the windows and of course, what would our Christmas Eve service be without candles?

It's winter. It's dark outside. It's cold and dreary – yet we have light. I love to sit in front of the firelight and look from there to the lights on the tree. As a kid I used to enjoy sneaking into the living room at night and lying on the floor, just enjoying the twinkling tree lights.

Kolbell writes: "... when we sing "Yet in thy dark streets shineth / The everlasting light," we are underscoring the old theological verity that light is preferable to darkness, a symbolic contrast intended to remind us that wisdom is preferable to folly, awareness is preferable to ignorance, compassion is preferable to hardness of heart.

It was God who created light and saw that it was good (Gen. 1:14–15). It was Isaiah (9:1–2), later echoed by Matthew (4:16), who called attention to people’s growing awareness of God’s love for them with the words “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.”

And it is in the First Letter of John where we are reminded that “Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness” (1 John 2:9).

In Bethlehem this fortuitous evening, Brooks is telling us, the wisdom and compassion of Almighty God will be brought into the world for all who are open to receive it.”

In little, humble, dark quiet Bethlehem, that night, so long ago, the light of the world was born. In thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.

And with that light the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.

Surely Mary, while proclaiming her song of joy as she came to know about the wondrous child she was carrying, surely she was also full of fear. This wasn’t something she had ever experienced before. This was something so out of the norm, so unbelievably true that she had to be afraid of it all – of what Joseph would do and think; of what others in her family and her friends would believe. Of childbirth itself!

Yet, fear was combined with hope and yes, even joy.

Surely the shepherds were terrified as the heavens filled up with angels that night, lighting up the dark sky, voices proclaiming this new and wondrous birth. Surely they were filled with fear and uncertainty as they entered the town of Bethlehem, searching for this small child, this God child.

And what about Joseph and Mary after Jesus was born? All these visitors! The Scriptures say Mary treasured and kept it all in her heart.

All was not peaceful in Bethlehem, as we talked about last week. There was much political unrest; there was jealousy and meanness and power issues – that led to the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt to save the life of their baby boy.

It was dark. It was a dark, fearful time. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Bethlehem, the place where hope and fear meet, where light shines in darkness, where joy enters – even as the Christ child entered the world – not with loud celebration (except for the angels to shepherds in the fields) but silently.

*How silently, how silently,  
The wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven.*

*No ear may hear His coming,  
But in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive Him, still  
The dear Christ enters in.*

What is the joy of Christmas? Is it opening gifts? Is it family gatherings, good food? Is it Santa Claus and Christmas trees? Is it Christmas music? Is it the joy of giving to others, making Christmas special for someone else?

All these things are elements of joy, aren't they? They certainly do (usually) give us pleasure, make us smile, give us warm memories and happy times.

But what about those who just can't bear going through all those motions and traditions? What about those whose pain is so deep because they are longing for a loved one who is gone? What about those who have suffered great tragedy? Or those who are facing a terminal illness, or a financial crash?

One thing I've discovered through the years is that nothing stays the same. We used to be determined that nothing would ever stop our family traditions at Christmas yet now hardly any of us are able to get together.

Can you be hurting, or lonely or even afraid and still have joy? I believe you can. I think it's not easy to recognize it sometimes because it is hidden under all that other gunk.

But Emmanuel came because of all that. Our joy is deeper and broader than anything else, if we know the one who is Emmanuel – God with us. Our joy is in spite of those things. Christmas joy means that while I might be afraid; I might be sad and longing for someone; I might be unsure of the future – I know who I belong to; I know God loved me enough to come to me as a baby and to live among us all.

Our joy is that he continues to come to us in every situation and he continues to work out his salvation for us all. As Paul said:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!*

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