

The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ: Christmas Eve 2009

Midnight Song

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

It is the middle of the night: dark, cold, very late. Yet here we are, far from home and bed, wrapped warmly against the winter, gathered by dim lamp and candlelight with questions in our minds that, in this time and place, are quieted by the sense of expectation in our hearts. We have been told a story, one we have heard a hundred times before but one of which we never seem to grow tired, because we so deeply want it to be true. It speaks of hope beyond hope, of love that casts out fear, of mystery laid in our hands for us to ponder and perhaps build our lives around.

Someone, somewhere, on some quiet winter evening long ago, told us the news of a baby's birth in a place where animals are fed; and because we were children then, still close to the time of our own babyhood, we were captivated by the thought of so much attention being paid to this tiny child so much like us. Angels watched and sang, the story said; and shepherds ran from the fields to check out the truth of the angels' song. And believing the sign of the child, they joined the song and told the world: *unto us is born this day a Savior, Christ the Lord*. One who will change our lives for the better and bring us close to God.

We have come like the shepherds (though we think we are better than they, somehow). We do not sleep outside, exposed to the dangers of the night in an open field. We have warm beds and clothing; we had enough to eat at supper, and we will certainly have enough to eat tomorrow. But there is in each of us a place of fear that is enlarged by the darkness, fed by the cold. As we guard what we have been given in this life to tend—not flocks of sheep, but flocks of people, flocks of things—we peer anxiously around to see where the wolves might lurk that would take them from us. As we watch people we love move away from us, either physically or emotionally—our children grow up, our parents die, our friends and families drift apart—we lose the warmth of their presence and feel a sadness that chills us to the marrow. Nothing seems as safe and sure as it did, once upon a time.

We long to hear the story again, to sing with the angels and visit the baby in his manger. We are no longer children, though; somewhere along the way we lost our trusting innocence. But we want to believe that God is with us in the dark and cold, and with that desire for faith overriding our mistrust, we have come. We come, all we faithful, claiming a faith we do not always feel, but tonight, in the middle of the night, dark and cold and very late, we have come to adore him, Christ the Lord.

I thank God that we have come—that *you* have come—for here at this table, on this shining night, Christ is waiting, longing for us even more than we have longed for him. The Child of whom the angels sang grew up, as mysteriously as we all have grown, grew ever more aware of God's desire for all humankind to live in peace and harmony and in the light of God's love; and in the end he laid down his life willingly to prove God's power to make all things new. His life, from beginning to end to beginning "restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn ... casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord. How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven

are joined, and [humanity] is reconciled to God.”¹ In the words of the poet Richard Wilbur,

“...every stone shall cry, / In praises of the Child
By whose descent among us / The worlds are reconciled.”²

The lamps and candles are lit, the table is set. The stars and angels, the shepherds and even the stones sing for joy that Christ is born. Now, in the middle of the cold, dark night, even at this late hour, let him be born in each of us so that we may join the song.

Amen.

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Bruton Parish Episcopal Church, Williamsburg, Virginia
24 December 2009 (10:30 PM Eucharist)

¹ The Exsultet, from The Great Vigil of Easter, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 287.

² *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), Hymn 104, verse 4. [Words Copyright © 1961 by Richard Wilbur, from his volume, *Advice to a Prophet and other Poems* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.).]