

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Christmas Eve; Lumina
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Sometimes, we too much fill space with too much talking. It's a busy world, with lots of words, all fighting for attention. Most of the time, that's okay; at least it's tolerable. We're used to the clutter. We know how to filter.

But sometimes we say too many things. It's as if we believe that only our words can give meaning to what happens. But if you've ever watched a sunrise at the beach, or stood alone in a great forest; or if you've ever tried to describe to someone why you love your beloved, or what it's like when one's child is born; you know what I mean. Something gets lost in the translation. We can maybe relate the facts, but not the meaning...or, at least, not the meaning to us. Stop for a moment, and we can all recollect those times in our lives that cannot be described, and are best cherished rather than explained.

Poets sometimes get closer. Less concerned with what something is in itself, they seek to pass on to others what it's like, and then let us draw our own conclusions. It's why, I think, we so treasure the songs we sing at Christmas. The words are all poetry, elevated by song.

But still, for many of us our favorite carol is "Silent Night," a song of quietude. Sometimes, even it's best that the poets be quiet, and the only thing to do is be silent.

It's 10 o'clock on Christmas Eve. It's dark outside; kind of chilly; it feels good to be somewhere warm. There's been lots of moving around this last little while. We've been busy, possibly to the last minute. It's always that way this time of year. That's part of how it is, and it makes us smile. It's a delightful time, filled with things that give us pleasure...tonight, and then tomorrow.

But pay attention to the story we just heard, and there's something worth noticing...the angels speak and sing; the shepherds exclaim, and are amazed, and race to the manger. We're supposed to get something from the angels...that if Augustus is announced by his courtiers, Jesus is announced by angels. We're supposed to get something from the shepherds...that the king comes to the poor and ragged outsiders rather than to the Pharisee hunched over the scriptures or the priest standing to make the sacrifice or the governor preparing his latest dispatch for the Emperor. The action here is neither in the Palace, the Temple, or the Synagogue. For the faithful Jew reading this story, there are hidden messages. The swaddling clothes point to a custom marking the faithfulness of the parents; and the child resting in a manger, not in an inn, are subtle references to the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah that proclaim that the Lord has come, and is near, and is waiting to be found. There's movement and words and messages all over the place in this story.

Except that Joseph is silent, and Mary ponders all these things in her heart. With Gabriel and Elizabeth Mary speaks and sings, and the rest of the characters in this story move and speak and pronounce. But tonight, the two closest to the child are still and silent.

Things happen in life that are beyond words. And sometimes, the only way to allow something in is to stop putting out. When the light of the world enters the world, it's best we absorb it rather than describe it. For it isn't chatter that makes our hearts still, but quiet. The great desert Father Arsenius once prayed "Lord, lead me into the way of salvation." What he heard in response was "Be silent." "In returning and rest ye shall be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" the Lord says through the prophet Isaiah.

Especially tonight.

This is a mysterious seed planted in humanity by the events of this evening. It has inspired countless stories beyond itself—all stories of hope and good will that see in us our best and ask of us our best. We are reminded this evening that we are a beseeching people, unable to save ourselves; needing the Lord to come to us. “What is not assumed cannot be redeemed,” said the Church Fathers...meaning that the only way all humanity—including our own selves—can be made right with God is through the scandal of the Word becoming flesh; through God coming to us to be one of us...even to the point of being a baby, nursed at his mother’s breast and held in his father’s arms.

But there I go...like too many preachers before me...starting to explain something that is best relished; trying to help us understand a miracle that is beyond understanding; saying more words and feigning a wisdom no human being has; because really, if there is a time to be quiet and just ponder like Mary, it’s late on a Christmas Eve.

There are times when it is best we allow the meaning of what is to roam around, and discover us; light a flame within us...times like Christmas; the reality of God becoming human, becoming one of us, all because of the incomprehensible greatness of God’s love.

The rest of this evening holds different things for each of us. Maybe we’ve got family at home, or friends visiting. That’s a perfect delight, and always blessings worth cherishing. But may it also be that at some point, sitting in front of the crèche at home, or by the tree, or lying in bed tonight before we go to sleep...that for a moment, we allow ourselves some stillness and quietude and some space to treasure these things in our heart, and ponder. That’s a good practice to include in our Christmas Eve.

Because what we’ve been waiting for has finally happened; who we’ve been waiting for has finally arrived. For the child has been born for us; a Savior given; our redemption draweth nigh; the Word is made flesh; the kingdom of God is among us; and though its dark outside and may storm tomorrow...tonight and always, as the great poem says, all is calm, and all is bright.