

December 25, 2009

The Nativity of Our Lord, Year C

Luke 2:15-20

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Chuck Girardeau, associate rector

One of the Christmas Eve traditions I have encountered at every Episcopal Church I have been associated with throughout my life is the singing of *Silent Night* after communion has been concluded. In many ways it is a wonderful tradition, giving the congregation one more quiet time to reflect on the meaning of the celebration – “sleep in heavenly peace,” “Christ the savior is born,” Jesus, Lord at thy birth.” This may sound strange to you, but I decided several Christmas ago that I want *Silent Night* to be sung at the very same place in my funeral. I decided this at the close of a very demanding year, both personally and professionally, where at every turn it seemed that nothing was calm, nothing bright and no change in sight. And then, kneeling there before the altar I heard and felt the impact of what this beloved hymn is really saying – that in the midst of the chaos and the turmoil of life and the world, God comes to us and is born as one of us, and for a moment, all is calm and all is bright. And so I believe it will be in the kingdom for us all. But we continue to live in the here and now in a world that is anything but calm.

I have always enjoyed being present at Christmas Day services. They are always smaller, calmer and distinctly different than the Christmas Eve services. Although we don't usually sing *Silent Night* at this service, in many ways this service reflects the nature of the hymn.

But now, in the light of day, things are somehow different. Our attention has been turned from the anticipation of the birth of Jesus towards the implications of His birth. We have left behind the journey to Bethlehem, and now reflect on the response of all of the creation and of those nearby to this marvelous event. We have move from expectation and anticipation to reaction and action, if you will.

I would guess that there have been hundreds, if not thousands, of Christmas songs written in my lifetime. Most are not especially good and many are not theologically sound – *Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer* for instance. Maybe a few will be recognized as suitable for the 2027 Episcopal hymnal. One contemporary song that I would vote for is *Do You Hear What I Hear*. This hymn has an interesting history and origin. It was written in the fall of 1962 by a composer and a lyricist named Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne Baker. Regney was inspired to write the lyrics “Said the night wind to the little lamb, “Do you see what I see?”” and “Pray for peace, people everywhere,” after watching babies being pushed in strollers on the sidewalks of New York City in the midst of the Cuban Missile crisis. Neither Baker nor Regney could perform the entire song at the time they wrote it because of their high emotions surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the 1962 Christmas season over a quarter-million copies of the first recording of this song were sold, and during the Christmas season of the following year the recording that so many of us know so well and love so much by Bing Crosby was

released. It remains near the top of most frequently played secular Christmas songs some forty-seven years later.

If you lived in the southeast portion of the United States, and especially in key centers of transportation, commerce and government, as I did in Atlanta, the world changed drastically in a very short period of time. We were well within the range of the missiles. I was in the 2nd Grade that year. We had “duck and cover” drills in our classrooms, and practiced emergency evacuations for our school which included instructions that we run home, not stopping for anything, even if we were out of breath. Atlanta, and the world, waited for whatever was to come. By the end of October the “crisis” was resolved, and we stepped back from the possible nightmare. But new uncertainty, anxiety and fear of the possibilities of the future remained.

Do you remember the pattern of the words of this wonderful little song? It retells the story of the Nativity in a way and not so unlike what we have just heard from Luke’s Gospel. All of creation is responding to Jesus’ birth – just as all of creation was waiting for redeeming grace. The night wind speaks to a little lamb as the star of Bethlehem appears in the sky. The lamb speaks to a shepherd boy as they hear the heavenly host of angels sing out their proclamation to those keeping watch over their flocks in the fields. The shepherds take action. First they go and worship the new-born Savior, and as they return they begin glorifying and praising God. And the shepherds become the first evangelists, “making known abroad” and proclaiming that God was about a new thing. God is with us! Emmanuel has arrived!

In the song a little shepherd boy goes to a mighty king – obviously not to the despicable Herod, but to some significant and powerful person and asks, “Do you know what I know?” After hearing the witness of the young shepherd the king takes action. “Said the king to the people everywhere – Listen to what I Say – Pray for peace people every where.”

Do You Hear What I Hear was written as a cry for peace at a particular time responding to a frightening crisis, its message speaks to us today. Do we know what the young shepherd boy knew?

If we stop and think, just for a moment, this age is anything but a time of peace. At this very moment this nation remains engaged in two wars. There is the anxiety and concern about healthcare reform, global warming, which initially as a geologist I discounted but now acknowledge, and we cannot forget the financial crisis and its far reaching impact on our families, our friends and strangers that is global. This is just the beginning of a long list of less than peaceful concerns.

Today we celebrate the incarnation of the Prince of Peace. This morning we see the star in our mind’s eye, we hear the wind carrying the songs of praises of the angels. Today we can pray for peace, the end of armed conflict around the world, but not just the end of armed conflict, we can pray that the peace of God will reign in our hearts. Today we can know what the shepherd boy knew. Maybe, just for a few moments here and now,

we can glimpse the Kingdom of God breaking into the world and know the calm and peace that radiates from the face of the newborn Christ.

But now we must not remain silent. We must carry the Good News of the presence of God in the world out into the world. We have received a gift, one that demands to be shared with the world about us.

Now, may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of the gift of God's Son Jesus Christ our Lord, and may that peace remain with us always.

Amen.