



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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Thoughts on a Beloved Christmas Carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

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In 2018, a contingent from Immanuel joined with my former parish, Christ Church, Pelham, NY, for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. One day on that pilgrimage, we journeyed out to the Shepherds' Fields in Bethlehem where, by tradition, the shepherds heard the message of the angels when Our Lord was born. We visited the Church of the Nativity, which is built over the traditional site of the grotto where Jesus was born.

To enter that church, one has to bend down and pass through a very low door. There are various historical reasons given for this, including the necessity of keeping livestock out of the Church. But the reason that always spoke to me, even when I was first there as a seminarian, is that one has to bend down to enter the site where God became one with us. Humility is required; one doesn't just stroll in. Entrance requires conscious adjustment of one's posture.

I wonder if this image was part of what inspired Phillips Brooks, an American, Episcopal priest, and author, to write the beloved Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Brooks had been a student at Virginia Seminary, right here on this holy hill. He went on to become a long-serving Rector of Trinity Church, Boston and then Bishop of Massachusetts. But Brooks was, perhaps, best known for his eloquent preaching and writing.

In 1865 while he was Rector of The Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, he spent Christmas in Bethlehem. Consider the context: 1865 and the end of the bloody Civil War, a time when it must have seemed the country itself was being torn apart. I wonder if Brooks was in Bethlehem to recover, to reorient himself for his ministry.

Brooks does not paint an idealistic, fairy-tale picture of Bethlehem:

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

He, and we, need a God who doesn't reside only in the ideal, but in the very real streets, hearts, and lives of the human condition. I can't imagine anything less would have sufficed after the Civil War, nor would it suffice now.

I love the way Brooks names the hopes and fears of all the years, being gathered together in that simple town, on those dark streets, announced to shepherds who were considered ritually impure by the religious authorities.

Brooks also speaks to the posture of the heart, mind, and attitude one needs to be a disciple:

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.

I wonder if Brooks was thinking of that low door to the Church of the Nativity. I wonder if he was realizing he didn't have all of the answers to all of the questions raised within him about the suffering he had witnessed? I wonder

if he felt the need to proclaim even more vigorously the Good News of God in Christ, well beyond the limits of even his sizable gifts for oratory? It seems for sure something in Bethlehem moved Phillips Brooks deeply. It affected him; it affected his ministry; and his treasured Christmas carol affects us still.

The last stanza is worthy of much meditation:

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!

Emmanuel (Immanuel), God with us, indeed! It seems Brooks envisioned a continual openness in the heart of any Christian disciple to that holy birth. Indeed, well beneath the noise and hoopla of Christmas, isn't that always the invitation? Isn't God being continually reborn in us, perhaps, our fondest hope and our deepest need?

Please enjoy this cherished carol, sung by the choir of King's College, Cambridge, featuring the powerful marriage of the words of Philip Brooks and the British composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams.

[O Little Town of Bethlehem \(Vaughan Williams\) {Hymn} \[King's - 2005, № 6\] - YouTube](#)