

“The Hopes and Fears of all the Years”
Christmas Eve Year C
Rev. Dr. Mitch Kinsinger
Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

24 December 2024
Arlington Hills Lutheran Church
St. Paul, MN

Born in Boston and educated at Harvard University, Phillip Brooks arrived in Philadelphia after his ordination as an Episcopal priest in 1859.

A dynamic preacher, while still in his twenties, Brooks rose in prominence as he preached forcefully against slavery during the Civil War, ministered to African American troops in nearby training camps, advocated equal rights for freedmen, and became active in the Union League.

At the end of four years of war, Brooks movingly eulogized Abraham Lincoln and the soldiers who gave their lives, including his brother George, who died of typhoid while serving in the Union Army.

From 1865 to 1866, Brooks spent a year in Europe and the Holy Land. While traveling, he wrote to the children of his church parish about visiting Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and being reminded of the hymn singing of his home congregation.

Three years later, he reflected on his experience by writing a poem for his Sunday School students, with the first stanza beginning:

“O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.”

The church organist, Lewis Redner, set the words to music, and the hymn was first performed at Holy Trinity during the Christmas season in 1869.

The words and music resonated with themes of stillness and peace
in the aftermath of the Civil War.

A no doubt longed for peace and stillness
at the end of the bloody and violent civil war.

The verse continues:

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

An early reviewer had this to say about the hymn:

“It is an exquisitely simple thing,
and yet one feels behind the words the existence of a great soul,
meditating on the mystery of the divine revelation.”¹

That’s pretty nebulous terminology, “a great soul, meditating on the mystery of divine revelation.” But the mystery of divine revelation, according to Brooks, is found in Bethlehem, where

The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

In this little town, Bethlehem, whose name literally means “House of Bread,” hopes and fears collide.

There was plenty to fear in the first century,
first and foremost, a brutal imperial occupier in Rome.

Who was yet again making its power known by making folks travel to their hometowns for a **census in order to be taxed**.

You know, the residents could have just been counted and taxed where they were living,

but this was a power move,
to remind the people who held the power.

Empires gonna make sure everyone knows who is in charge. .

In addition to the brutal Roman Empire, there were
limited life spans,
diseases,
and pain and suffering for most people.

And of course, there is no shortage of things that give us pause, if not cause fear today. We too live in a time of uncertainty and fear.

Brutal suffering in the wars in Gaza and Ukraine.

Emerging American oligarchs seem poised to rig or are even already rigging the system in their favor.

¹ <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/o-little-town-of-bethlehem/>

Income inequality, racism, sexism,
too much injustice,
And not enough peace.

David French is a columnist for the New York Times who writes about religion in the U.S. His article from this past Sunday begins this way:

Here's a question I hear everywhere I go, including from fellow Christians: Why are so many Christians so cruel?

I can't tell you the number of times I've heard someone say something like: I've experienced blowback in the secular world, but nothing prepared me for church hate. Christian believers can be especially angry and even sometimes vicious.

French is a Christian so he's not casting aspersions on others, but self-critically trying to understand the behavior of people who hold many of the same beliefs about the triune redeeming God revealed in Jesus.

As he tackles the answer to the question "why are Christians so cruel," he concludes that,

It's a simple question with a complicated answer, but that answer often begins with a particularly seductive temptation, one common to people of all faiths: that the faithful, those who possess eternal truth, are entitled to rule. Under this construct, might makes right, and right deserves might.

"Might makes right" is how the world works, right? You've heard the take on the "Golden Rule," right, the ones with the gold make the rules?

I would add that if you scratch the surface just a little bit on cruelty and "might makes right" mentality, you find *fear*.

Fear, warranted or unwarranted, leads us to behave in ways than we would otherwise behave. Fight or flight or fawning siezes our souls, we may lash out.

But the incarnation tells a different story.

Tell an opposite story:

Right makes right.

And because of this, the angels tell the shepherds, "fear not."

It's counterintuitive, right? But such is the Kingdom of God!

There is an old Puritan prayer that gets at the counterintuitiveness of the Kingdom of God this way:

Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up,
That to be low is to be high,
That the broken heart is the healed heart,
That the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
That the repenting soul is the victorious soul.²

In a fearful world, we are called to “fear not”

For, in the words of Titus from our reading today,
The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all (2:11)

So what fears do you have today? Job security? Financial fears? Health concerns? Family challenges? Make no mistake, these fears are real.

But so is the grace of God, in a babe in the manger, here to set the world right.

* * *

“The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight,”
Met in Bethlehem and met in the Christ-child in the feed trough.

“... We hear the Christmas angels,
the great glad tidings tell;”
Telling us to fear not, and trust God,
Who is born this day, in the City of David,
A Savior who is Christ the Lord,
God with us,
The Lord Emmanuel!

Thanks be to God, **Amen.**

² Quoted in <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/19/opinion/faith-god-christianity.html>