

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

December 24, 2008

Christmas Eve

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie; above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by....How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; 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.”

“Still, still, still, one can hear the falling snow. For all is hushed, the world is sleeping, Holy Star its vigil keeping, Still, still, still.”

“Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.”

On a night when children are restless for Santa to come; on a night when parents are eager for children to go to bed; on a night when we have a service full of activity -- singing, and bell ringing and dancing; on a night when we remember how busy and crowded Bethlehem was long ago; and how the sky was filled with a heavenly host of angels singing out glorias and alleluias; on a night when families and friends are gathered for special dinners and parties -- how amazing it is, I think, that so much of our Christmas language is about stillness and quietness and peacefulness. For we are seldom still and quiet people, are we? And how many of our Christmas preparations and our Christmas activities have been calm? When this service is over, I will have a full house of people eating and drinking and talking and laughing. It's not going to be a silent Christmas celebration. I suspect yours won't be either. And we like the Christmas noise, don't we? The music, the parties, the games, the shouts of glee, the jingle bells jingling and the reindeer prancing; the ho-ho-ho-ing and the in excelsis deo glorying. What would Christmas be without the sounds of Christmas?

But with all the noise can come confusion, too. And some of the sounds of Christmas are jarring to our ears. Have you ever had a Christmas celebration without some kind of crisis, minor or major, or some kind of conflict? The tree falls over, or the oven doesn't heat right and the turkey is undercooked, or the new doll gets broken or the skates are too big? Or maybe it's a family member who is grumpy and then makes everyone else grumpy, or maybe it's the hard reality of a sickness or a recent death in the family that creates tension and evokes sadness in your eyes and voices ; maybe it's the gap between what you want and what you can afford, or the gap between what you need and what you can afford that brings forth sounds of anxiety and anger into your Christmas; maybe it's a change or loss of employment; maybe it's knowing a loved one is in harm's way; whatever the reasons, the sounds of Christmas can be both in tune and out of tune, can't they? They can be sweet and merry; they can be painful and jarring.

I learned this Christmas that the word “bedlam” is connected with the word “Bethlehem.” Did you know that? St. Mary of Bethlehem was founded as a hospital in England in 1247. Two centuries later it was restructured as an institution for the hopelessly insane. The noise and confusion of the hospital became widely known throughout the country. The Cockney accent, over the years, contracted “Bethlehem” into “Bed'lam.”. So “bedlam” which means “a place, scene, or state of uproar or confusion” is a contracted form of the word “Bethlehem,” the town described in our Christmas carols as still and peaceful. Isn't that interesting? Because we know all about the bedlam of Christmas, don't we? Each in our way, through our own life events and circumstances has experienced Bethlehem bedlam -- when things didn't go how we

planned or wanted, when bad things happened we didn't expect; when trouble came that we couldn't control; when the frenzied uproar of it all was just too much.

Yet the silence of Christmas still beckons us, doesn't it? -- and the stillness of Christmas still draws us close. For there's something about all this -- about this night, the angels, the star, the shepherds, the manger, the candles, that appeals to us in a way we can hardly put into words. For when we sing about a calm night, something calms inside us too. When we hear the angels proclaim "peace on earth," the hope of peace is re-kindled within us; and when we look at silent stars go by, our spirits are stirred, and we know we can get through one more Christmas.

Listen, even if you are surrounded by noise and confusion tonight and tomorrow, I invite you to find just a bit of quietness for yourself. Maybe you can stay up for a few minutes after everyone else goes to bed tonight, or you can get up a few minutes before all the activity starts tomorrow morning, and just be quiet. Look at the tree or manger scene you have in your house. Or just look out the window at the dark night sky or the early morning light. And just be still. Think about what all this Christmas stuff means to you. Think about those you love and those who love you. Think about what's most important to you in your life. Is it the presents under the tree or the presence of those you love? Is it something that glitters on your hand, or the star of hope that glitters in the sky? Is it what you have, or who you are? Is it who you are or is it whose you are?

Luke tells us that after the shepherds left, Mary pondered all these things in her heart. A little quiet time of pondering is a good way to spend a little bit of our Christmas. I hope you'll do it -- and in that pondering I hope you'll feel your heart gladden. For even when there's bedlam, and even when there's heartache, and even when there's trouble in our lives and in our world, Christmas still speaks a calming and brightening word to us: Don't be afraid. Rejoice. "Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy to you and all the world. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Such good news is worth pondering. And such good news is just enough, I trust, to give you a merry Christmas.

I close now with excerpts of a hymn by Jasroslav Vajda, called *Now the Silence, Then the Glory*. The hymn is about what we experience in worship, but is also a fitting description of what the Advent/ Christmas season means to us. Because first we wait --and then we celebrate. First the silence, and then the glory. Listen:

Now the silence. Now the peace. Now the empty hands uplifted. Now the kneeling. Now the plea. Now the Father's arms in welcome. Now the hearing. Now the pow'r. Now the vessel brimmed for pouring. Now the body. Now the blood. Now the joyful celebration. Now the wedding. Now the songs. Now the hearts forgiven leaping. Now the Spirit's visitation. Now the Son's epiphany. Now the Father's blessing. Now. Now. Now. Then the glory. Then the rest. Then the Sabbath peace unbroken. Then the garden. Then the throne. Then the crystal river flowing. Then the splendor. Then the life. Then the new creation singing. Then the marriage. Then the love. Then of the feast of joy unending. Then the knowing. Then the light. Then the ultimate adventure. Then the Spirit's harvest gathered. Then the Lamb in majesty. Then the Father's Amen. Then. Then. Then.

So, tonight the manger. And tomorrow the feast. Tonight the star. Tomorrow the stockings. Tonight the peaceful quiet. Tomorrow the noisy celebration. In it all, God is present. Through it all, the Light still shines. And among it all, Christmas love dwells and Christmas joy sings its song. May the silence of Christmas stir your soul. May the sounds of Christmas gladden your heart. Amen.

