

SERMON 904

December 24, 2014

Christmas Eve

977th Week as Priest

804th Week at St Dunstan's

69th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee



HOLY MEMORY HOLY MYSTERY

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

The essential message of Christmas is one of hope, or as our Prayer Book says, “a sure and certain hope.” The American poet Carl Sandburg wrote that the birth of a child is “God’s opinion that the world should go on.” That’s why every Christmas is an opportunity for hope, a moment of joy,

a fullness of time for the human race. And we, as Christian people, ought to be the most hopeful, the most joyful, and the most encouraged of all people because our life of faith began 2,014 years ago with the birth of a child.

The birth of this Child Jesus is a holy memory, something that we carry in our hearts. Likewise, the birth of this Child Jesus is a holy mystery, a fullness-of-time event that defies explanation, and yet we know to be true in our heart of hearts.

Now I am of the opinion that *every* birth, and *every* child, is a real-life, honest-to-goodness miracle. I suppose that's part of the reason why I am so enthusiastic and eager to baptize little babies. As we welcome a new child into the world, we are taking part in the miracle of life. As we baptize the child, we are welcoming him or her into the household of God, a place where we all belong. We give praise and glory to Almighty God for this child, and in doing so, we are giving that same praise and glory to God the Father for giving us his Child.

In Holy Eucharist, there is a suspension of time and space, an understanding that somehow, some way, we are present in the one, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice of the Prince of Peace.

Likewise, at Christmas, if we pay careful attention, we see that somehow, some way, we are present in the one, perfect, and sufficient birth of the Prince of Peace.

These are holy mysteries, and they are the deepest of truths about us as the people of God. They seem to require art and poetry, because normal words and everyday images fail. They are hard to explain, and impossible to understand. The birth of Jesus Christ in a stable in Bethlehem of Judea is a holy mystery, what the poet E.E. Cummings called,

the deepest secret nobody knows ...
the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart
i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart)

My dear friend, Mary Littlejohn Belser, has been a member of St. Dunstan's for a long time, back when she and Tom came to Auburn from Vanderbilt and the church was known as "Church of the Holy Innocents." Mary was a graduate student at Auburn and an English professor at Tuskegee.

Her family has been woven into the fabric of the Church all their lives. She served on the altar guild for 50 years, practically a lifetime. St. Dunstan's is for Mary not just a

building but a holy place, a place of peace, a place filled with holy memories, a place that speaks of our holy mysteries. But she has told me that *for her*, the greatest of her memories is the birth of her twin daughters, Elizabeth and Katherine, and their baptism at St. Dunstan's. She carries these holy memories in her heart.

Betty and Jimmy Weldon, like Jean Kerr, have been a part of the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany from its very beginning 20 years ago. They were there when the Bishop of Alabama explained that an Episcopal Church wouldn't make it in Tallassee. They were there when Epiphany was in a store front, and people came to make it a Church.

When they bought the land, and moved to the Little House, more people came. And with a succession of fine priests, and a spirit of generosity and determination, they built a beautiful building and paid for it.

As they look back on 20 years of becoming and belonging, Jimmy and Betty and Jean have a sense of the Church as a place of holy memory and holy mystery.

My own life reflects this same connection to holy memory and holy mystery. For Leigh and me, it is a marriage of true minds for 38 years; it is the births of our daughters, Jenny and Margaret, and their marriages to two perfectly-excellent

Matthews; it is the births of our grandsons, John Wells and James; and the totally unanticipated and extraordinarily wonderful arrival of our granddaughter, Stella.

This is the way that Almighty God works in our lives. There is always more happening than meets the eye. The Christ who comes into our lives does not club us over the head with certainty, or provide all the answers to our questions with cold hard facts. No, he comes into our lives in the most unexpected of ways. He invites us to belong to his way of living—a way of hope and joy and mercy and relationship and possibility, a life characterized by holy memory and holy mystery—a life of love, a life of faith. He holds us in his heart, and he holds us in his arms, the way you would hold a newborn child.

So here is the deepest truth we know ...

It is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart
Christ carries your heart with him (he carries you in his
heart). **AMEN.**

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