

SO BEAUTIFUL, IT HURTS

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Point Pleasant Presbyterian Church

December 24, 2018; Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

***“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God
for all they had heard and seen...”***

Luke 2:20a

**Christmas in lands of the fir tree and pine.
Christmas in lands of the palm tree and vine
Christmas where snow peaks stand solemn and white
Christmas where corn-fields lie sunny and bright.
Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight.**

**So all the stars of the midnight which compass us round
Shall see a strange glory and hear a strange sound,
And cry, “Look! the earth is aflame with delight;
O sons of the morning, rejoice at the sight.”
Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight.**

That’s poetry by the nineteenth-century preacher, Phillips Brooks:

“Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight.” Look around, friends: for indeed we are in good company. Not only are we surrounded by friends and neighbors within these four walls. Look further, in your mind’s eye. Look beyond these walls. Look beyond the borders of towns and counties and states and even nations, and you’ll sense the presence of countless others: believers and seekers (and even doubters), who have come to churches like this one (and some not at all like this one), to sing carols and light candles and hear timeless words of scripture.

It's a night of overwhelming beauty, Christmas Eve. For when else — in this culture when everyone seems to be walking around with headphones in their ears — do we do something so blessedly old-fashioned as sing songs together that everybody knows? When else — in this society so sharply divided along generational lines — do we spend a whole hour together with people of all ages, from the very old to the very young? And when else — in this world where everything seems to be plugged into the electrical grid — do we do something so archaic as stand around together, holding lighted candles? Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight!

Something has drawn us here, something very hard to put into words. It's a vision we all share — or, at least, a common hope of glimpsing it. It's a vision that finds expression in that cherished moment at the end of the service, when we hold those candles and sing "Silent Night," and maybe catch the eye of a friend or loved one as we're both thinking, "Yes indeed, it's Christmas!" The vision that pulls us out of our busy, frenetic lives and into this quiet place is a vision of beauty.

Too often, beauty is cheapened and devalued in our culture. Millions of dollars are spent every day to try to convince us that beauty is something money can buy. Whether it's the department-store alchemy of lipstick and eye-liner... or

the sleek, aerodynamic lines of that shiny, new car at the dealership... or the crisp, high-def images dancing across the giant flat-screen TV in the store, there are some who would have us believe that beauty can be had — can be owned — for a price.

But not the kind of beauty that's drawn us here tonight. That beauty is not for sale. It's the simple beauty of a mother's smile, as she gazes down at the baby slumbering on her lap... of a father's protective love as he stands, a silent sentinel, behind her... of the gleam in the eyes of the shepherd children who have come on bended knee to adore the holy child.... of the song of the angels, and the star shining softly overhead.

Some years ago, the Norwegian actor Liv Ullman was part of a small performing troupe who traveled through the back country of her native land, presenting plays. They visited tiny villages nestled in remote valleys and perched on the sides of majestic mountains. As their journey through the land of the fjords continued, Ullman was struck, over and over again, by the sheer natural beauty of her native land. Writing about the experience later, she said, "It is so beautiful, it hurts inside."

Isn't that what we're all looking for, on Christmas Eve: a vision so beautiful,

it hurts? A vision that brings a lump to the throat and a tear to the eye? That vision can't be manufactured, nor can it be bought or sold — not for any price. It can only be hoped for — and, once it is discovered, gratefully received.

That vision is so often at odds with the daily realities of life as we know it. For, while our lives do have their moments of beauty, they're also shot through with suffering and tragedy. Maybe little children are able to approach Christmas with unabashed enthusiasm, but you and I don't need to live very long before we discover that the joys of this life are seasoned with trouble and difficulty. On the morning after Christmas, we will awake to the same responsibilities, the same bills, the same relationships, the same diagnoses, the same addictions, the same memories. What difference does it make that it's "everywhere, everywhere Christmas tonight," when the day after tomorrow it's everywhere, everywhere just another day? Maybe that's what brings the tear to the eye as we behold the babe in the manger: the contrast between life as we live it, and life as we know it could be.

The famous cellist Pablo Casals, in his autobiography, *Joys and Sorrows*, recalls his earliest memory of going to church on Christmas Eve, in the company of his father, who was the church organist. Listen to the way he recalls this memory of his, from the perspective of old age:

“When we stepped out of the house it was dark and cold — so cold that bundled up as I was, the chill went right through my

clothes and I shivered as we walked, though I did not shiver only because of the cold. It was all so mysterious; I felt that something wonderful was about to happen. High overhead the heavens were still full of stars, and as we walked in silence I held my father's hand, feeling he was my protector and guide. The village was hushed, and in the dark narrow streets there were moving figures, shadowy and spectral and silent too, moving toward the church in the starry night. Then, suddenly, there was a burst of light — flooding from the open doors of the church. We moved into that light and into the church, silently, with the other people. My father played the organ, and when I sang, it was my heart that was singing and I poured out everything that was in me.”¹

At the tender age of five, Pablo Casals caught it: the vision of beauty, of life as God means it to be. It stayed with him all his life, as he labored to create beauty through his music and share it with others.

Luke tells us that, after the shepherds “went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger,” they “returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.” I often wonder about those shepherds — what their lives must have been like *after* that vision of angels, and their trip to see the Christ child. (We know nothing about what happened to them, after that holy night: the scriptures are silent on the subject.) In the years to come, did they call that precious memory to mind on cold, desert nights, hunkering down in the high

¹Joys and Sorrows, reflections by Pablo Casals, as told to Albert E. Kahn. Out of print, but available online: <http://www.cello.org/heaven/joys/chap2.htm> .

pastures with their flocks? Did they speak with their children about what they had heard and seen? Evidently, the shepherds' public witness, their "glorifying and praising" of God, didn't make much of an impression — because, by the time Jesus reached adulthood, none of his neighbors in Nazareth knew a thing about his exalted beginnings. Only his mother recalled that vision of beauty, the one Luke tells us she "treasured in her heart." Visions are like that. They're hard to hold onto, because they're so fragile.

There's a part of us that looks at the Christmas story and wants to relegate it to the world of fantasy: to portray it as an idyllic scene that may speak to our deepest human longings, but which has no more reality than any other work of the imagination.

Yet, this vision of beauty is not like that. The child who was born that day in Bethlehem was a living, breathing human being. He grew up to wear the same rough garments, walk the same gravelly roads, break the same crusty bread as anyone else who lived in that time and place. And when the day came for him to die, be fully assured that he bled the same hot blood as flowed through the veins of any other child of God.

Yes, the familiar tableau of Jesus' nativity is a vision of beauty: but do you know what's the greatest thing about it? *That vision was real.* New Testament

scholar J.B. Phillips seeks to remind us of that fact, in this much-quoted portion of a larger essay:

“It is 1500 years ago that this apparently invincible Empire utterly collapsed, and all that is left of it is ruins. Yet the little baby, born in such pitiful humility and cut down as a young man in his prime, commands the allegiance of millions of people all over the world. Although they have never seen him, he has become friend and companion to innumerable people. This undeniable fact is, by any measurement, the most astonishing phenomenon in human history. It is a solid rock of evidence that no agnostic can ever explain away.

That is why, behind all our fun and games at Christmastime, we should not try to escape a sense of awe, almost a sense of fright, at what God has done. We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet.

We shall be celebrating no beautiful myth, no lovely piece of traditional folklore, but a solemn fact. God has been here once historically, but, as millions will testify, he will come again with the same silence and the same devastating humility into any human heart ready to receive him.”²

You know that tonight we’re celebrating the 200th anniversary of another

²J.D. Phillips, “The Christian Year,” from *Good News: Thoughts on God and Man* (Macmillan, 1963).

simple, but unforgettable vision of beauty: the vision that led to the writing of our final carol of the evening, “Silent Night, Holy Night.” It’s a vision that arose out of unusual, and not-very-ideal circumstances. In a little Austrian church, as Christmas Eve approached, there was a crisis. The organ had broken down.

What to do? There was no time to get an organ-builder in to repair it. The assistant pastor, Father Joseph Mohr, approached the organist and choirmaster, Franz Gruber. He handed him the words of a poem he had written a couple of years earlier. “Can you do anything with it?” he asked.

The only working instrument Gruber had at his disposal was a guitar. So, it was for the guitar that Gruber composed a very simple, but lovely, melody. The congregation loved it, and the new Christmas carol, translated into many languages, made its way around the world.

Nearly a century later, on Christmas Day, 1914, the carol was sung in a very unlikely place. The farm fields of France and Belgium were scarred by deep, muddy trenches, topped by barbed wire. The artillery pounded incessantly, day and night. Now and again, the smell of deadly gas wafted across the ruined landscape, and weary soldiers rushed to don their gas masks.

The Great War, as they called it, was about five months old. The leaders of those warring nations had promised their fighting men it would all be over in a few

weeks. In truth, it would take almost four more Christmases before the guns would finally be silent in the so-called “War to End All Wars.”

Pope Benedict XV had proposed a truce on Christmas Day — to give the weary soldiers a few hours’ respite — but the leaders of the so-called Christian nations of Europe ignored his plea. The soldiers knew about it, though. And so it happened that, at various places along the line, there was a spontaneous truce, for which no general was responsible.

The British soldiers heard the Germans singing, “*Stille nacht, heilige nacht*,” and they answered back: “Silent night, holy night.” It was then that the miracle happened.

Men climbed out of the trenches without their rifles. They spoke together, they sang together, they shared chocolate and tobacco, they passed around photos of their families.

All along the line, more and more men stepped out into the devastated zone between the trenches known as No-Man’s Land. In one place, they say, there was a friendly game of football — the sport we know as soccer.

The next day, the fighting resumed: and, in all the wartime Christmases that followed, the generals on both sides commanded their lieutenants to make sure there was no more unauthorized fraternization with the enemy. But, in 1914, for

one, brief moment, the vision of beauty — of the holy infant, so tender and mild — triumphed over humanity’s worst impulses.

And so, tonight, I invite you to bear that vision in mind as you open your heart wide. This is no time for holding back. As we light our candles, and join together in singing “Silent Night, Holy Night” — accompanied on the guitar, as originally intended — may you drink in the beauty of all our Christmas traditions. But more than that, may you experience in your deepest heart the feeling that’s so beautiful, it hurts – the feeling of knowing this God who lives among us!

Let us pray:

**In the silence,
in the holiness of this night, O God,
all is now calm;
all has become bright.
No longer can we maintain the boundary-walls
we have built to keep you out.
For you are waiting just outside...
waiting as you always have...
waiting for us to let you in.
Help us to do so tonight:
to give up our prideful struggle for independence
and welcome this babe of Bethlehem,
your son Jesus,
as our Lord and our Savior. Amen.**

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