

**Donald G. Brown
St. Mary the Virgin, SF
Christmas Eve 9:00 PM
December 25, 2016**

The United States has just come through a very turbulent and difficult election. The president has been replaced by a candidate from the opposite political party. Many are fearful about where he intends to take the country. The future is full of many questions as to what will happen to the nation.

Just so no one is confused, the period I'm speaking of is not 2016.

I'm referencing what was a terrible period in our nation's history when the assassinated President Abraham Lincoln was replaced by a member of the opposite party, Andrew Johnson who went try to undo Lincoln's vision of a nation where all were equal and free. Johnson went on to avoid impeachment by just one vote in the US senate.

During turbulent times then, as now, fear was and is an ever present companion. It's in this context of very troubling times, that the Episcopal rector, Phillips Brooks, in 1868, after a trip to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, wrote one of the most treasured of our Christmas carols, which we will sing tonight during communion.

The first verse of that carol carries a very powerful and reassuring message:

**O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
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 to-night.

In fact the hopes and fears of all our years are met in the Light of Christ on this Christmas Eve.

No need to dwell on what fuels our fears. These fears are there lurking in the back of our waking hours and at times they are the stuff of our worst nightmares. Some of these fears we can name quite clearly...others are less defined in our minds but it is their vagueness that makes them all the more menacing. Some have to do with issues going on in our personal lives, others are related to the state of the world where billions are spent on ensuring safety and peace and the very thing promised seems more illusive and impossible with each passing day. You know the essence of your fears. But what are your hopes on this holy night?

Perhaps you are not really too sure. Oh, you know about hoping to get that new “whatever” as a Christmas gift, or hoping that for just once all of the relatives can get along at Christmas, or perhaps yours is a hope that your health will improve, or if you’re a student, that your grades will prove better than your study habits, or maybe your hopes are things like hoping for an end to poverty, hunger, homelessness, domestic violence, or international conflict and terrorism.

As noble or as mundane as some of our hopes might be, I am afraid that they often are not really hopes as much as they are wishful thinking. Wishful thinking boils down to the desire we have to play the role of God and control all of the forces that toss us too and fro in this world. Wishful thinking is what keeps people buying lottery tickets or heading down the road to the casino.

Hope, at least Christian hope, is something much more deeply rooted than what we usually claim as our hopes. Christian hope is grounded in the conviction that in spite of all the darkness and tragedy in the world, and at times in our

own lives, God is present. Hope is the simple heartfelt realization that God really does care for you, as you are with all your flaws and imperfections, and that God will never abandon you or fail to love you.

Hope is the ability to look to God, not to do your will and order the world after your desires, but simply to trust that God will dwell with you and out of your life bring something that is good and blessed.

One of the most important messages of Christmas is that true hope is to be found in our lives by looking to the one who was born in that stable in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

Some of you will get in touch with that hope here tonight and some of you will start moving in that direction. Others of you will ask for ways in which you can gain a deeper knowledge of yourself and the God who created you.

I must tell you that in order to minimize the radicalness of this story of the birth of Jesus, over the centuries we have cleaned up the stable where Jesus was born. It is now bright, shiney, not a speck of dirt or dung is found on any of the humans, the place even smells good.

So look well beyond this pale reflection and see the stable of Bethlehem as it really was. The dirt, the stinky straw, the cold, the loneliness, the deprivation there you will find the essence of God's radical love.

If you would really like to encounter the living Christ look to the living flesh and blood people who struggle at the edges of our society. You will find Christ's living presence among some of the marginalized people who are the recipients of groceries delivered by St. Mary's parishioners. You'll find Christ at the AA meetings hosted here at St. Mary's each week of the year.

You will find the living Christ making his home among the very poorest of people who struggle to make ends meet so their children have at least the bare necessities. You will find him this night among those who serve around the world in

our military, or who tend the sick and the dying in our hospitals or who work in law enforcement and fire protection. You will find him among those people who selflessly give of themselves in ways that incarnate the love and care of the living Christ for the lost and the least. You can meet, and do meet, the living Christ in what seem to be the least likely places.

As you were reminded at the start of this service, on this night “we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Light of [God’s] presence in our world.” Jesus is, as the Nicene Creed puts it, “the Light from Light” that shines into the dark corners of your life and illuminates your path and takes you to places and circumstance where you could never imagine yourself going; but in that journey you will find hope and be surprised by a joy which is not of your own making.

At the end of this service we will be singing “O Little Town of Bethlehem” as well as “Silent Night” in the candle lit darkness of this church. In the hushed silence of this holy night I urge you to open your ears and heart and listen for God’s message to you. The message that will light your way into the New Year will be much like this insight given to us by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. “You are ...God’s representative. You are God’s stand-in, a God carrier. You are precious; God depends on you. God believes in you and has no one but you to do the things that only you can do for God [and God’s world]. Become what you are.” This is wise counsel for each of us on this Holy Night.

In Christ’s birth and life you will discover your own true birth and calling. “God depends on you. Become what you are.” AMEN