

The Dear Christ Enters In  
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Date: December 18, 2016

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“The Dear Christ Enters In” Pilgrim Church UCC, December 18, 2016, Fourth Sunday of Advent (Matthew 1:18-25)

It’s just a week before Christmas believe it or not! Now when we contemplate the Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus Christ we will see visually represented on Christmas Eve at our Pageant, we may tend to focus on Mary and Jesus. After all, Mary has her beautiful and powerful moment in the Gospel of Luke we heard last week—the Magnificat. Remember she’s not meek and mild, she’s strong and wild with her political manifesto! Mary proclaims: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant . . . He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”[1]

When one considers Nativity scenes, it’s always Mary at the center (usually meek and mild, let’s be honest) with baby Jesus. Joseph tends to stand stoically beside them but often apart. Sometimes it’s hard to even differentiate Joseph from a shepherd who came in from the fields! Joseph has a supporting role in this drama. Even today, when we get to hear part of the Christmas story from Joseph’s perspective in the Gospel of Matthew we don’t hear his voice. In Matthew, Joseph agrees to do as the angel commands him in his dream. We read: “when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus.”[2] But we don’t get to hear what Joseph thought about any of this, not really. We don’t hear his perspective (even though it would have been narrated by Matthew anyway!) Mary got a whole duet with the Angel Gabriel in Luke and a catchy solo awhile later. Joseph is basically silenced. He doesn’t even get a speaking part in what is his story too—the righteous man and a descendent from the house of David who was unwilling to expose his young, pregnant fiancé to public disgrace.

What we do see is the depth of Joseph’s love for Mary and the depth of his trust in God. Maybe this love and trust are beyond words. For no words can adequately express his compassion. Instead, Joseph is a man of action and we see his loving action front and center on this Fourth Sunday of Advent—this Sunday when LOVE is our theme.

Joseph took Mary as his wife despite her pregnancy before their marriage. He named this child Jesus as the angel instructed—perhaps knowing in his heart that Jesus was to be Emmanuel or perhaps not. Joseph raised this child and did not abandon this child or his mother even though all popular conventions, rules, laws, customs, and traditions dictated that he should have. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann relates, “God will recruit as necessary from the human cast in order to reorder human history.”[3] God recruited Joseph to help tell a new story, a story that would change human history, a story born in a manger in Bethlehem. And a story that went back a whole lot further than that mysterious night because God has a habit of working in unexpected ways.

That’s an amazing aspect of a life of faith. The knowledge that God works in unexpected ways and the knowledge that God needs us. God needs you and God needs me. Think of what’s happening in our world right now. If we want to help the people of Aleppo, Syria—we can. We can donate money to good organizations helping in the region like the White Helmets, Doctors Without Borders, the Syrian American Medical Society, and others. We can lobby our government. We can advocate for helping refugees who are fleeing from years of violence. We

don't need to stand helpless in the face of tragedy. Take other issues that you care about, people or places that are pulling on your heart strings in this week before Christmas. Know that God needs you just like God needed Joseph and Mary to enter into the human story in a profound way through our Bethlehem Baby. Maybe that's empowering. Maybe that's a little intimidating. Though Joseph's story shows us that God will recruit among our human cast of characters to reorder human history. Joseph's story shows us that God needs us and God uses ordinary people to do some pretty amazing work in the world.

Now another person God used to do amazing work in the world was Episcopal Priest Phillips Brooks who wrote the last hymn we will cover in this Sermon Series on the Stories Behind Christmas Carols.[4] On Christmas Eve in 1865, Phillips Brooks was far away from home in Philadelphia recovering from a difficult time. Brooks was already recognized as one of the most dynamic Christian voices in America and had given the funeral message as a stunned country laid President Abraham Lincoln to rest. This honor and leading the congregation of Philadelphia's Holy Trinity Church through the Civil War had taken a toll on him spiritually. So he took a Sabbatical and decided to tour the Middle East as many modern clergy still like to do!

On Christmas Eve in Jerusalem, he felt overwhelmed by the other pilgrims. Brooks decided to borrow a horse and set out across the barren countryside to spend a few hours at peace and away from the crowds. As the sun was setting, Phillips Brooks felt an overwhelming sense of awe. The first stars of evening were beginning to emerge in the night sky and he rode into the little town of Bethlehem like Mary and Joseph many years before him. In his mind, he was recalling the Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus Christ. At the same time, he was seeing the actual places right in front of him. This great preacher found himself speechless. Brooks would later tell his family that the experience was so overpowering that it would forever be singing in his soul. This was one of those moments where God was just so present for him—a true religious experience, a Thin Place.

Now his path in life had not always been easy. When he was twenty-two he had graduated from Harvard and was teaching at Boston Latin. Though he was a devoted teacher, he became frustrated by the lack of effort his students put forth and decided to move on from teaching. Phillips Brooks was unsure of his future and decided to enter the Episcopal Theological Seminary and began studying to be a priest. When he graduated, he accepted a call to begin his ministry in Philadelphia.

In the midst of the Civil War, Brooks would look out upon his congregation and see women wearing black, mourning the loss of husbands and sons. He became emotionally and spiritually tired because the congregation wanted him to be inspirational and give them hope. Ultimately they wanted an end to this war that had divided our country. But even though he did his best Sunday after Sunday and was a long-time advocate for the emancipation of slaves, he couldn't give the congregation what they really needed—peace. So after the Civil War, Brooks felt that he would recover and bounce back to deliver those inspirational messages again. Only the spiritual pain intensified for him when President Lincoln was assassinated and he was called upon to give some meaning to a tragic loss in our nation.

All of this matters to know the story behind "O Little Town of Bethlehem" because the words were written by a man in spiritual pain. This was the dark night of his soul. He went to the Holy Land desperate to recover his faith and to heal. The trip and that religious experience in Bethlehem profoundly affected him, though it was hard for him to convey the experience to others. He wrote in his journal, "Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which, strangely enough, they put the shepherds . . . somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still keeping watch over their flocks." [5]

It wasn't until 1868 (three years after his Sabbatical), that he was able to simply relive that religious experience and jot down the lines that came to the forefront of his mind. These are the lines that we sing in "O Little Town of Bethlehem" today. Brooks took his poem to his friend and the organist of Holy Trinity Church Lewis Redner who worked on a majestic rhapsody to carry the simple words. But he failed on his first attempt, no inspiration came to fit music to the poem. Redner couldn't come up with anything, and as he slept on Christmas Eve night he woke up with a straightforward unadorned tune on his heart. The tune perfectly fit Brooks' poem and "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was finished on Christmas morning in 1868.

This Christmas Carol was a favorite in Philadelphia for years, but took longer to become known to the rest of America and eventually the world over. Reverend Phillips Brooks became known as the greatest American preacher of the nineteenth century and there's even the Phillips Brooks House: Center for Public Service and Engaged Scholarship at Harvard today!<sup>[6]</sup> He's buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery just up the road and students from Harvard even carried his casket to his final resting place after the funeral. They carried his casket from Trinity Church in Boston to Mount Auburn which was no small feat as he was 6'4 and weighed 300 pounds. This was an act of love.

Though the world may not remember all those sermons Phillips Brooks preached, people have held onto the words that came from his awe-inspiring religious experience in that little town of Bethlehem that was singing in his soul for years before he could even share it with others. For they are the simple words of a pilgrim in the Holy Land searching for meaning, searching for healing, searching for God:

"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."

Amen.

[1] Luke 1:46-48 and 52-53, NRSV.

[2] Matthew 1:24-25, NRSV.

[3] Walter Brueggemann, as quoted by Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey in UCC Sermon Seeds, December 2016.

[4] Ace Collins, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas, 139-145.

[5] Phillips Brooks as quoted by Ace Collins, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas, 143.

[6] History of Phillips Brooks House: Center for Public Service and Engaged Scholarship, Harvard University, <http://publicservice.fas.harvard.edu/phillips-brooks-house>