

**Love is born**  
**Luke 2:1-20, Christmas Eve, Year B**  
**24 December 2008**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

It's dark outside. Night has fallen and the warm sun is hidden far below the horizon. The air is chilled, and it chills. The darkness seems to seep into our bones. The candles by which we began this service are precious, but partially so because they are so fragile, barely able to fend off the night's darkness.

It's dark outside. The economy is crumbling. Pillars of society such as the Big Three automakers that once seemed as permanent as the Liberty Bell itself now totter at the edge of extinction. Retirement accounts melt away faster than we can pull them up on a computer screen. The earth is warming at an alarming and potentially catastrophic rate, and we seem not to have the will to change our lifestyles and arrest it. Extremist terrorists walk brazenly into restaurants and hotels and make sport of snuffing lives like so many candles, taking pleasure and perverse satisfaction at breeding confusion and fear. The sun indeed seems to have slipped inexorably below the horizon. It is dark outside, and we shiver with the chill.

On December 10, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article reporting that the birthrate drops dramatically during times of national uncertainty, especially economic recession. Person after person quoted in the story expresses dismay bordering on despair about the prospect of bringing a new child into such a troubled world. The birth of a child is an act of hope, and the times border on hopelessness. One woman said with stark and sad honesty, "I'm not confident about the future."

As things spiral into the darkness, people quit having babies. This phenomenon was imagined in its terrifying extreme in P.D. James' novel *Children of Men*, in which women suddenly and worldwide lose the ability to conceive. As the years go by, the last generation born grows to adulthood, and the narrator points out that a world without children's laughter is a dark and hopeless world indeed.

The first century was no time for a child to be born. In Judea, the heel of occupying Rome was pressing down ever harder on the Jewish people. And the very ones who ought to have defended common folk—Herod the political leader and the religious leaders in the temple—were weak, corrupt, and sycophantic. Drought, poverty, and even domestic terrorism plagued those days as they plague ours. A comet traversed the sky, accentuating rather than dispelling the surrounding darkness and seeming to portend more bad tidings. We must remember, Mary didn't plan to have her child. In addition to being young and not yet married to

Joseph, we can imagine that her apprehensions about bringing a child into a world so dark were at least as potent as our own.

Madeline L'Engle paints the scene in the first half of her poem, "The Risk of Birth."

**This is no time for a child to be born,  
With the earth betrayed by war and hate  
And a nova lighting the sky to warn  
That time runs out & the sun burns late.**

That's the first half of L'Engle's poem. But listen to the rest:

**That was no time for a child to be born,  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
Honor and Truth were trampled by scorn—  
*Yet here did the Savior make his home.***

**When is the time for Love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
And by greed and pride the sky is torn—  
*Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.***

You see, even with all the evidence to the contrary, on that night—on *this* night—the darkness recedes! Because despite the fact that everything in our experience tells us this is no world for children, God chooses to take the risk and be born among us. He takes the risk to enter into the world that we have torn asunder, and he enters—miracle of miracles—*as one of us*. From this night forward, we are not alone. Any and every thing we face is faced alongside a God who walks and has walked this way with us, who enters in fullness into our lives, sharing our fears, our vulnerabilities, and most importantly, our hopes.

The birth of a child is always an act of hope, and in this case the reverberations ripple out cosmically. To the anxious parents shoved into the back corner of a barn to have their child among the grime and the animals, hope is born. To the shepherds fearful in the fields with wolves pacing round, hope is born. To *us* huddled in this sanctuary from the darkness and chill outside, *hope is born*. And as Madeline L'Engle says so eloquently, *Love* is born.

What do we do with this? What does it matter when we walk from here back into the darkness? It matters because we walk back into a world in which God walks *with us*, in which as John the Evangelist tells us, "the *light shines* in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it." The light that shines is not like the taunting light of a fleeting comet or the fragile light of a candle. It is, rather, the eruption into the night sky of the heavenly chorus, driving back all darkness and singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!"

This matters because each and every time we who have received *this* news respond to *that* light, every time we face down the darkness and express that love and live through that hope, then the heavenly host sings yet again, and the light of Christ is spread, driving back the darkness in another's life.

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Forty years ago on this very night, three men found themselves in the most remote and opaque darkness ever experienced. They were 239,000 miles from home, and the men of the first manned lunar mission passed over to the moon's dark side, losing all visual and radio contact with every other human being in existence. There is no light on the far side of the moon. The darkness is absolute. Can you imagine what it must have felt like? But then the command module came back round the moon's horizon, and Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and William Anders became the first three people ever to witness an earth rise. From their perspective—which must have been something akin to God's—what they saw was not a world shrouded in darkness but a world alive with light! On that Christmas Eve, overcome with the blazing glory of the earth, Borman, Lovell, and Anders read the first ten verses of the Book of Genesis. Their words sounded across the scratchy radio waves like the chorus of angels in the night's sky over Bethlehem. Borman ended the message by saying, "And from the crew of Apollo 8 we close with good night, good luck, and merry Christmas—and God bless all of you, all of you on the good earth."

**When is the time for Love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
And by greed and pride the sky is torn—  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.**

When we walk from here back into the darkness, we do so knowing that the light shines alongside us and for us, that God has been born again, sharing our lives to show us the way of hope and love.

Merry Christmas, and God bless all of us, all of us on the good earth. *Amen.*