

The Eve of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ December 24, 2010
Midnight Mass, Christ Church Cathedral
RCL (2)
Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20

I know Christmas is near when I hear “the dragon” mentioned. Let me explain.

Last night as we wrapped gifts, Linda Sue and I watched *The Bishop’s Wife*. Tim and Becky had no interest in the movie and were off saving the world via video games. This has always been a favorite holiday movie, and given the events over the last few months, exactly three months ago today in fact, it has a bit more significance for us!

The Bishop’s Wife stars David Niven as Bishop Henry Brougham, a new bishop wanting to build a cathedral. His wife Julia is played by Loretta Young, and Dudley the angel is played by Cary Grant, a case of typecasting if ever there was one. Bishop Brougham is determined to make the new cathedral a beacon to the city leading the people into the future and not a monument to the past, but he finds not everyone shares his vision. His stiffest opposition comes from Mrs. Hamilton, who will fund most of the building project provided a large, centrally located chapel bears her late husband’s name. She is determined to get her way using every means at her disposal, and she successfully uses her considerable influence to thwart the bishop’s plans to build unless she gets her way.

On the 23rd of December the Bishop feels he has run out of time to raise the funds to build his way, and calls on Mrs. Hamilton to apologize for his stubbornness, which he chalks up to youth, and agrees to allow the chapel she wants. She says at one point, “Now as to the large stained glass window in the George B. Hamilton Memorial Chapel depicting St. George slaying the dragon, I should very much like the countenance of St. George to suggest that of my late husband.” The desperate bishop swallows hard, and replies, “Yes,” and then asks, “Who do you see as the dragon?”

For me that line is one sure sign that the Twelve Days of Christmas are drawing near. We all have those signals that speak to us that Advent is giving way to Christmas or put us in the Christmas mood.

But it is also a blessing when something new speaks to us and gets our attention. I had such a moment earlier this week.

It happened at our house about 1:30 Monday afternoon. I was shuttling some gifts from the trunk of the car into the house when I stopped on the steps of the back porch to listen. The air was filled with sound that was beautiful and amazing, complex and simple. The temperature had finally reached a few degrees about freezing. The sun was out for a brief time, and the gentlest of breezes was stirring. And the ice began to melt. From branches of trees and bushes came the sound of cracking and falling ice. From the full eaves along the house the steady drip of thawing ice and water fell onto still ice-covered ground and pavement, creating a different sound. As the breeze stirred, more cracking sounded, and then, I became aware of the sounds being created in my yard, but also beyond, something akin to the concentric circles created in a pond when a rock is thrown. In the yards of neighbors, and beyond, the cracking and crashing and other sounds of the thaw filled the air. An IMAX theatre could not have captured the event more vividly.

Into such figurative ice-covered landscapes the Holy Child is born. This feast of Christmas creates in you and me a complex and mysterious experience, in that we sense two celebrations are happening concurrently: a unique event long ago, which nevertheless is current. The Child was born for us, and at the same time, is born again for us this night. And the ice-covered parts of our lives, and throughout the world, begin to crack, and thaw, so that new life, redeemed by grace and healed by forgiveness and unconditional love, nurtures in each of us life, and nurtures in the Church the call and desire to be peacemakers, and servants of those in need, and the voice of those too often forgotten, too tired, and too weary to say anything else.

The prophet Isaiah tonight sounds the call of hope and triumph! He sees the Promised One of God coming near as a stately procession. The people recognize their hope is coming and break out into joy. Their enemies are defeated, they are freed, no longer slaves to their captors. The prophet exhorts the people: *"Build up the highway! Clear away the stones, See, your salvation comes!"* (Feasting on the Word.)

This is no mere wish that Spaghetti Junction would be recreated for a smoother rush hour! The prophet announces the arrival of Salvation, wholeness, peace with God and one another.

And Isaiah concludes: You shall be called “The Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord,” “Sought out, a City Not Forsaken!”

And the cracking of ice, of hearts and minds frozen due to lack of hope, resounds throughout the City. Can we hear it, here in Louisville? Can you and I as the Church proclaim to the suburbs AND the urban core, to the east end AND the west end: God has come!?

In the Incarnation, God has sought us out; he has come bringing salvation and wholeness to all people. We rejoice! We praise God for such rich love and grace. And our hymns of praise and celebration must lead us to live confidently that we are children of God, that we are to treat and serve all people as fellow citizens of heaven. As God’s people, we must proclaim in word and deed – mostly deed I pray – that all the city, all the diocese, all the Commonwealth is a City Not Forsaken.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that the birth of the Messiah foreshadowed the life he would live and offer for us as well as the life he still calls his people to embrace. Being born, as we used to say, in such mean estate, demands – demands – that his Church be born in the most unlikely of places, that we become incarnations of grace and light and life in the places where some mistakenly assume God is not. There is no such place. We who are baptized promise to seek and serve Christ in all people. He is already there.

The angelic proclamation to shepherds is as profound as any part of this story. Some were hired hands; others were the owners of the sheep – shepherds worked long hours, day and night, on the outskirts of the city and society. Their life was also of mean estate, a hard life eking out a meager living, often at the mercy of the elements and victims of theft and beatings. Life expectancy was not long. This description is too close to the reality many Americans and most of the world still lives with.

Statistics have not changed since I mentioned in my first sermon as your bishop that according to globalrichlist.com if your annual income

is \$33,750 you are in the top 5 percent of the wealthiest people in the world. At \$47,500 you are in the top 1 percent. The wealthiest, people like many of us, like me, were not the audience the angels sought out. Perhaps this should make us tremble.

“Why?” is a question worth pondering this Christmastide, not to pile guilt upon us, but to help us face reality, that we might eagerly accept the responsibility that comes with abundance, and embrace the richness of humility which can be lived out in every vocation and in every board room. That responsibility can be reflected in every check book as in how we use our money, in every calendar as in how we use our time, and in our attitudes as in how we treat one another and our neighbor, be she friend or modern equivalent of a shepherd.

This Christmas Eve provides opportunities we must not squander. Three ghosts visited Ebenezer Scrooge to show him that this Christmas we can be changed. God from God, Light from Light has not only come, but seeks us, each of us, to help build his reign.

In Dante’s *Inferno* the ninth and final ring of Hell is called treachery, inhabited not by the “merely fraudulent” but by those who have betrayed relationships. This is Dante’s construct based on the medieval concept of Hell, not God’s blueprint, and our God of unconditional Love would not consign us there. But we know the hell we place ourselves in when we betray the most important of all that Christ taught us: all the law and the prophets come down to loving God with all our being, and our neighbor as our self. Dante’s ninth ring has the inhabitants incased in ice.

This night that ice cracks. And though snow is falling outside the cathedral, tonight all creation thaws before the light of the Manger. We are freed from the chains that bind us, chains we have created for ourselves. We are freed from fear and given courage to serve with boldness. I say again, the gift of this Christmastide must not be squandered.

Father Edgar Wallace writes: “This year, the old sentimental carols, the homey pictures of the manger, the comfortable holiday traditions, and the twinkling lights—as lovely as they are—just don’t seem quite enough to say what needs to be said. The world longs for something

more. We need the deeper truth behind it all. Let us proclaim unequivocally that God in Jesus has come to love this whole world, and that his love can never be restrained. No person, time, or place is beyond this love—not the humblest manger, not the darkest day, not the hardest heart." (*The Rev'd R. Edgar Wallace, St. Matthias' Church, Minocqua, WI*)

Beloved, may this season begin a time of recommitting to lives marked by servanthood, for the love of him born this night, who came not to be served, but to serve. We all have something to give and do. Let us be as joyfully in this work as we are in keeping this feast.

Along with the Dean and all the Cathedral and Diocesan staff members and their families, my own family - Linda Sue, Timothy, and Rebekah - join me in wishing you a joyous and festive Twelve Days of Christmas. Together, as people sought by God, let us not forsake this City or this Commonwealth!